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THE DWELLERS BETWEEN: YUP'IK SHAMANS AND CULTURAL CHANGE  
IN WESTERN ALASKA

By

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Bachelor of Arts, Humboldt State University, Arcata, CA, 2005

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in History

The University of Montana  
Missoula, MT

May, 2011

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The Dwellers Between: Yup'ik Shamans and Cultural Change in Western Alaska

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This paper examines the history of the Yup'ik Eskimos of western Alaska and explores how their shamans shaped the response to introduced epidemic disease. As in the experiences of so many other Native American groups, disease epidemics played an important role in the history of relations between the Yup'ik Eskimos and white settlers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I argue here that while the Yup'ik Eskimos grappled with the devastating effects of introduced diseases, they did not repudiate their shamans and traditional faith, which sets the Yup'ik people apart from other Native Americans. Before contact with Europeans, the Yup'ik people relied on their shamans for physical and psychological healing. Despite challenges from missionaries, traders, and disease, the Yup'ik Eskimos retained faith in their shamans well into the twentieth century. The shamans' enduring power as healers rested on specific features of the Yup'ik belief system and the inability of western medicine to cure disease at crucial historical moments. During Russian rule in western Alaska, the shamans maintained their influence over the people by leading the Yup'ik Eskimos to incorporate new diseases, like smallpox, into their world view. Later, American missionaries and their western medicines brought enormous pressure onto the shamans to relinquish control. However, widespread disillusionment following the terrible double epidemic of 1900 encouraged the Yup'ik people to return to their shamans.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Many years ago Ississaayuq was born in the village of Kwethluk, located on the shore of Alaska's Kuskokwim River. After the death of his parents, a grandmother cared for the young orphan, and he was treated well by the people of Kwethluk. He grew up and married a woman who lived in Qinaq. At this time, Ississaayuq revealed to the people that he was a shaman. The young man began to heal people, and other shamans became jealous of his extraordinary skill. These shamans told lies about Ississaayuq and accused him of causing a child's death. The people of Qinaq turned against the young shaman, and he decided to leave the village. Ississaayuq wrapped himself in a wolf skin and went to speak to his family. He told them that he was tired of the villagers' accusations and had determined to cast evil towards the members of the community by cursing the young people who were so cherished by their families. Ississaayuq then turned himself into a dog and escaped from Qinaq.<sup>1</sup>

Frank Andrew, Sr., the elder man who shared this story about Ississaayuq, said, "Now you will tell the story to others [in the future]. You will now tell it when you are asked to tell a story. I know many stories that are different from the one I just told, the ones they told many years ago." He continues, "The ones I like, ones I enjoyed listening to, I hear them once and never forget them again. I think all people should strive to be like that. By observing and listening intently, I think one will never forget what he heard."<sup>2</sup>

Frank Andrew, Sr. told his stories to an anthropologist and Yup'ik translators so that people would continue to pass Yup'ik cultural knowledge to future generations. He recalled

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1 This tale is a short excerpt from a much longer story told by the author. (Missaq) Frank Andrew, Sr. *Paitarkiutenka: My Legacy to You*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan, trans. Alice Rearden and Marie Mead (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 321-333.

2 Ibid., 321.

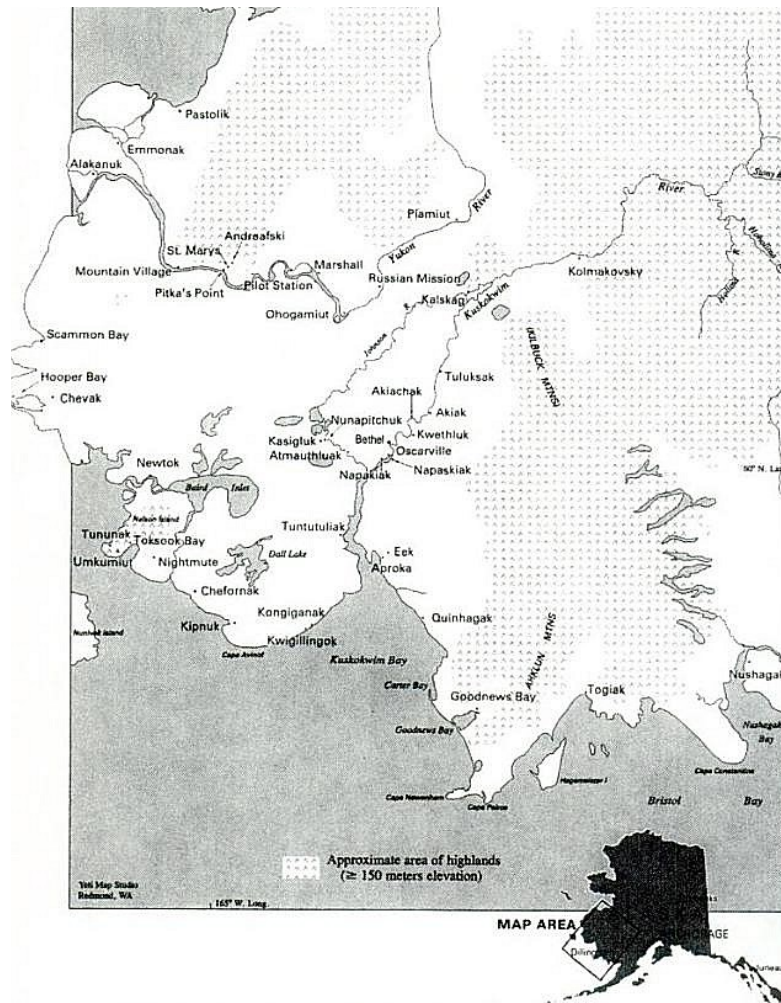
stories that needed telling in order to link the past and present. Ississaayuq is the subject of many tales among the Yup'ik Eskimos of Alaska. He was a powerful shaman who demonstrated great feats of magic and predicted the coming of white people. A panoptic narrative of the shamans' place in Yup'ik history merits attention, because that story also represents continuity between the past and present. The story of shamans among the Yup'ik people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a fascinating glimpse into a period of tumultuous cultural change, yet also one of abiding values and practices. In addition, disease history does not often receive adequate treatment in historical literature, and the shamans played a crucial role in shaping the ways that the Yup'ik people responded to introduced diseases. Despite challenges from missionaries, traders, and disease, the Yup'ik Eskimos retained faith in their shamans well into the twentieth century. The shamans' enduring power as healers rested on specific features of the Yup'ik belief system and the inability of western medicine to cure disease at crucial historical moments.

The Yup'ik Eskimos who tell the story of Ississaayuq occupy western Alaska. As a subgroup of the Inuit Eskimo culture that stretches from the Aleutian Islands across Alaska and Canada to Greenland, the Yup'ik people are distinguished from Inupiaq speakers by their use of the Central Yupik language. Yup'ik Eskimos inhabit a subarctic coastal tundra shaped by the broad Yukon, Kuskokwim, and Nushagak Rivers and innumerable smaller sloughs and streams.<sup>3</sup> Diverse flora and fauna inhabit the region. In his 1830 travels Russian explorer Ivan Vasilev found the Kuskokwim River, "very pleasant; the river passes through hills of moderate height, crowned with thick forests of larch, silver fir, poplar and birch, or made beautiful by grass and flowers. However, nearer its mouth the Kuskokvim flows through a low and swampy plain, which is quite barren over 80 miles from the river mouth; only a few bushes thrive in the liquid

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<sup>3</sup> Ann Fienup-Riordan, "The Yupiit of Western Alaska," in *Endangered Peoples of the Arctic: Struggles to Survive and Thrive*, ed. Milton M.R. Freeman (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 248-249.

and alluvial mud.”<sup>4</sup> The inland Kilbuck and Kuskokwim mountains are low, rolling volcanic ranges that give the southern half of the region a distinct character. A few islands lie off the coast that also support Yup'ik populations, including Nunivak Island, Hagemeister Island, St. Lawrence Island and Nelson Island.<sup>5</sup>



Map of Western Alaska<sup>6</sup>

- 4 Ferdinand Petrovich Wrangell, *Russian America: Statistical and Ethnographic Information*, trans. Mary Sadouski (Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press, 1980), 63-64.
- 5 Robert Shaw, "An Archaeology of the Central Yupik: A Regional Overview for the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, Northern Bristol Bay, and Nunivak Island," *Arctic Anthropology* 35, no. 1 (1998): 236.
- 6 Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays: Yup'ik Lives and How We See Them* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 4.

While visitors sometimes characterize western Alaska as barren and bleak, especially during the long winters, there is a sublime quality to the region that Hudson Stuck, who journeyed through western Alaska in the winter of 1917, described well: “In the main the country traversed is as dreary and naked as I suppose can be found on earth, and cursed with as bitter a climate; yet it is not without scenes of great beauty and even sublimity, and its winter aspects have often an almost indescribable charm; a radiance of light, a delicate lustre of azure and pink, that turn jagged ice and windswept snow into marble and alabaster and crystal...”<sup>7</sup>

Even today, the Yukon-Kuskokwim area remains physically isolated. Few people outside Alaska know about the region, its people, or the dynamic history of this unique place. Isolation has contributed to the delayed development of scholarship on the Yup'ik Eskimos, but today readers can access a variety of excellent works on western Alaska.

### **From Eskimology to Ethnohistory**

The first academic studies of Yup'ik Eskimos tended to generalize all Eskimo cultures as homogeneous and changeless. While the personal experiences of non-natives who visited the Eskimos formed the basis of early research, by the mid-twentieth century archaeological excavations in southwestern Alaska allowed scholars to consider the effects of foreign trade goods on nineteenth-century Eskimo material culture. Also, translations of pertinent journals and documents from Russian explorers and the Russian-American Company added breadth to the primary source base. In the past few decades, as the Yup'ik people have embarked on a cultural revitalization movement, a handful of indigenous and white scholars have undertaken the challenge of interpreting Yup'ik cultural history from a multi-disciplinary approach, which will

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<sup>7</sup> Hudson Stuck, *A Winter Circuit of Our Arctic Coast: A Narrative of a Journey with Dog-Sleds Around the Entire Arctic Coast of Alaska* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), ix.



no doubt continue to expand the field in new directions.

The earliest English-language histories of Alaska, such as Hubert Howe Bancroft's 1886 massive study of the territory, focused mainly on Russian activities in the southwestern region of Alaska and described the Eskimos only in passing. Americans knew very little about the natives who lived in the newly-acquired land far to the north, and few who lived and worked in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region wrote about their experiences. According to anthropologist Margaret Lantis, "scientific monographs on Alaskan Eskimo culture, including language, published between 1880 and 1930 can be counted on fewer than ten fingers."<sup>8</sup> The sparse ethnographic literature, written by non-native visitors to native communities, tended to depict static or declining Eskimo cultures. However, a handful of Americans who traveled in the region gathered valuable ethnographic data, including William Dall, Edward W. Nelson, and George Gordon.

The work by Arctic historians of the early twentieth century commonly categorized Eskimos as possessing one culture that varied little across the Arctic region. Russian historian P.A. Tikhmenev classified all northwestern native populations in Alaska as generally one people; based upon their physical similarities and the fact that they "differ very little in customs and mode of life."<sup>9</sup> Edward Moffat Weyer's 1932 *The Eskimos: Their Environment and Folkways*, describes the vast geographical distribution of Eskimo populations, from East Cape, Siberia to eastern Greenland. While Weyer acknowledges the impact of contact with outsiders, "transforming them from a nature people to a hybrid of the primitive and the civilized," he also asserts that Eskimo culture, which is suited only to the environmental conditions of the Arctic,

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8 Margaret Lantis, "Present Status of the Alaskan Eskimos," in *Science in Alaska: Selected Papers of the Alaskan Science Conference of the National Academy of Sciences National Research Council*, ed. Henry B. Collins (The Arctic Institute of North America, 1952), 49.

9 P.A. Tikhmenev, *A History of the Russian-American Company*, trans. and ed. Richard A. Pierce and Alton S. Donnelly (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978), 435.

prevents full assimilation in Western culture.<sup>10</sup> Danish anthropologist Kay Birket-Smith also argues that Arctic conditions shape Eskimo culture, and, although the Arctic people have adapted new technologies in their material culture, they still suffered from a “stagnation of the society” in the early twentieth century. In *The Eskimos*, originally published in 1927, he contends that, “if finally we look at the Eskimo society as a whole, we cannot but be struck by its primitive stamp. We see how it has grown almost unconsciously, like one of the poor plants of the Arctic soil.” Birket-Smith labels the Yukon-Kuskokwim Eskimos as among the most primitive cultures left in Alaska because of their late and limited interactions with the Russians.<sup>11</sup> Scattered scholarly and ethnographic works would remain the only literature on the Yup'ik people until anthropologists began exploring southwestern Alaska.

Due to the dearth of documentary evidence available, and a general lack of interest in the region, the first cultural studies of southwestern Alaska Eskimos developed only in the late 1940s. A handful of anthropologists initiated study of the Yup'ik region, supplementing documentary evidence and field work with archaeological excavations. Lantis devoted her anthropological work to understanding the cultural practices that distinguished Eskimo groups in Alaska. She published *The Social Culture of the Nunivak Eskimo* in 1946; it was the first complete description of any Alaskan indigenous group. She begins the 1947 book, *Alaskan Eskimo Ceremonialism*, a broad study of Alaskan Eskimos, with the statement, “it is surprising but true that no one has ever tried to give a comprehensive picture of any large section of Alaskan Eskimo culture.”<sup>12</sup>

While Lantis relied on personal interaction with Yup'ik people to inform her research,

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10 Edward Moffat Weyer Jr., *The Eskimos: Their Environment and Folkways* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1932), 3-5, 7.

11 Kaj Birket-Smith, *The Eskimos* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1959), 137, 152, 221-23.

12 Margaret Lantis, *Alaskan Eskimo Ceremonialism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1947), x, xi.

others utilized the findings of archeology to examine cultural change. Early archaeological research was small-scale, mostly individual efforts, and scattered throughout southwestern Alaska.<sup>13</sup> James VanStone and Wendell Oswalt were among the earliest scholars to undertake significant archaeological research in the Yup'ik region. Their excavations provided valuable insight into the material culture of the Eskimos during the early eras of Russian and American contact. VanStone focused much of his ethnographic work in the Nushagak River area, on the southern border of the Yukon-Kuskokwim region, while Oswalt concentrated on the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta. Both researchers found that traditional Yup'ik material culture survived well into the American period of occupation.<sup>14</sup>

During the decade of his archaeological excavations, VanStone recognized the need to incorporate ethnographic and historical information into studies of nineteenth-century cultural change in Alaskan Eskimo communities. He realized that strictly archaeological or historical studies would suffer from a lack of sources and context. The question of how best to write indigenous history is a serious one for historians who are trained to rely on primary documents and secondary works to reconstruct the past. Historians of Native America who rely solely on documents written from a Western viewpoint confront serious challenges. The Yup'ik Eskimos began writing only in the late nineteenth century under the tutelage of missionaries; therefore an accurate and inclusive history about the Yup'ik people must recognize the limits of documentary evidence. Ethnohistorians utilize the resources of many disciplines, including history, ethnography, physical and cultural anthropology, archeology, and folklore to understand cultural change in regions that do not necessarily have a long tradition of written documents. Historian

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<sup>13</sup> Shaw, 236.

<sup>14</sup> Wendell H. Oswalt and James W. VanStone, *The Ethnoarcheology of Crow Village, Alaska*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 199 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967), 69, 79; James W. VanStone, *Akulivikchuk: A Nineteenth Century Eskimo Village on the Nushagak River, Alaska*, vol. 60, *Fieldiana: Anthropology* (Chicago, IL: Field Museum Press, 1970), 11, 14.

Richard A. Pierce argues that ethnohistorical methods have proven extremely valuable in Alaska's indigenous studies because “the silent centuries before written records in Alaska have begun to yield information unobtainable with older, more limited techniques.”<sup>15</sup>

VanStone contends that ethnohistorians must establish a “baseline of aboriginal culture” in a geographic area and then examine changes chronologically in order to understand the process of cultural evolution. While he admits that a totally accurate baseline may be impossible to construct, VanStone argues that after developing a record of the “cultural acquisitions and losses” through a combination of history, ethnography, and archeology, scholars can construct patterns that more accurately interpret the arc of modern Eskimo cultures. Oral histories may also inform research, although few elders remember stories of life before foreign influence.<sup>16</sup>

VanStone demonstrates the ethnographic approach to cultural history in *Eskimos of the Nushagak River: An Ethnographic History*, published in 1967. He addresses the difficulty of constructing an aboriginal baseline because by the 1960s, few Yup'ik Eskimos could recount accurate information about their culture before outside contact. Instead, VanStone relies on Russian and American documents and supplements his study with archaeological evidence.<sup>17</sup>

According to Ernest S. Burch, Jr., a social anthropologist, since the 1970s ethnohistorical research has become decidedly “more systematic, better informed, and more sophisticated, both theoretically and methodologically, than it ever was before.” In Alaska, research in recent decades has been aided by reprints of early historical accounts, and recently discovered journals,

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15 Richard A. Pierce, preface to *Ethnohistory in the Arctic: The Bering Strait Eskimo* (Ontario, Canada: Brown & Martin Ltd., 1983), xiii.

16 James W. VanStone, “Ethnohistorical Research in Southwestern Alaska: A Methodological Perspective,” in *Studies in Anthropology, 7: Ethnohistory in Southwestern Alaska and the Southern Yukon, Method and Content*, ed. Margaret Lantis, 49-70 (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1970), 51, 57, 62, 64-65.;

17 James W. VanStone, *Nushagak, an Historic Trading Center in Southwestern Alaska*, vol. 62, *Fieldiana: Anthropology* (Chicago, IL: Field Museum Press, 1972), 50, 52, 72.

reports and other materials from archives and museums.<sup>18</sup> Since the 1980s, certain patterns have emerged in the methodology of scholars who explore Yup'ik cultural change. Their work has become more sophisticated and thesis-driven, rather than the straightforward accounts of earlier anthropologists. Slowly, Yup'ik studies began to incorporate indigenous voices as well. Also, a few Yup'ik-born scholars emerged who brought a different view to the story of their history. These evolutions in the field have combined to create a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of Yup'ik history.

In 1988, Wendell Oswalt published a comprehensive ethnographic history of the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta region, the longest and most detailed work on Yup'ik history to date. In *Bashful No Longer: An Alaskan Eskimo Ethnohistory, 1778-1988*, Oswalt approaches the study of cultural change from the viewpoint of access. While scholars may craft ethnohistories from a variety of perspectives, such as focusing on technological changes, ethnicity, colonial relationships, or historical eras, Oswalt argues that a geographical approach is most appropriate to understand Alaskan Eskimo history. He contends that Western access to an area and the frequency of visitation established the rate of change among an indigenous population. The goals of Westerners were also important factors that influenced the types of interactions and depth of cultural changes in an indigenous population. Oswalt relies on the two concepts of access and goals to frame his ethnohistory of the Yup'ik Eskimos.<sup>19</sup>

Ann Fienup-Riordan began writing extensively about the Yukon-Kuskokwim Eskimos in the 1980s and melded Yup'ik voices with traditional anthropology and history in an unprecedented fashion. She has concerned much of her work with acculturation studies, Yup'ik

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18 Ernest S. Burch, Jr., "The Ethnography of Northern North America: A Guide to Recent Research," *Arctic Anthropology* 16 (1979): 91-92.

19 Wendell Oswalt, *Bashful No Longer: An Alaskan Eskimo Ethnohistory, 1778-1988* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), xvi, xviii, 205.

spirituality, and oral histories. In her 1990 compilation, *Eskimo Essays: Yup'ik Lives and How We See Them*, Fienup-Riordan describes research informed by her relationship with Yup'ik communities involved in a cultural revitalization movement. She also discusses cultural continuity in modern Yup'ik communities. Fienup-Riordan argues that while cultural change accelerated with missionaries and other Westerners moving into the Delta region in the late 1800s, the area held little appeal for commercial interests because it had few natural resources. The relative isolation enjoyed by the Yup'ik Eskimos has allowed them to remain obscure and to retain much of their culture.<sup>20</sup>

Yup'ik religious practices are the center of a 1991 biography of the first Moravian missionaries in Bethel, Alaska. Fienup-Riordan's *The Real People and the Children of Thunder: The Yup'ik Eskimo Encounter with Moravian Missionaries John and Edith Kilbuck*, details the collision between Yup'ik spirituality and Christianity. Fienup-Riordan argues that missionaries laid the groundwork for Eskimo adaptation to Western capitalist society. Other factors also facilitated the conversion process, according to Fienup-Riordan, including the long-established presence of the Russian Orthodox Church, disruptions caused by epidemics, and the Yup'ik belief system that accepted Christianity as an additional source of spiritual power. According to Fienup-Riordan, the Yup'ik people did not abandon traditional beliefs, but made conscious decisions to adapt to changing circumstances.<sup>21</sup>

Fienup-Riordan relies heavily on Yup'ik voices to shape her anthropological studies. To craft her 1994 book, *Boundaries and Passages: Rule and Ritual in Yup'ik Eskimo Oral Tradition*, Fienup-Riordan worked with elders to record the complex Yup'ik cosmology system. Fienup-

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20 Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays*, 26, 197, 214.

21 Ann Fienup-Riordan, *The Real People and the Children of Thunder: The Yup'ik Eskimo Encounter with Moravian Missionaries John and Edith Kilbuck* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 11, 74, 207, 361.

Riordan's work with oral history provides a model for employing Yup'ik voices in the scholarship of cultural continuity and change. She is concerned not only with crafting anthropological studies of the Yup'ik people, but also in understanding their conceptions of history, a recent trend in anthropological and historical research. However, the interest in indigenous voices has raised debates among scholars. Some contend that professional scholarship and indigenous histories are two separate ways to examine a history, and primacy should be given to the professional historian's factual account. Others have argued that melding both scholarly accounts and native views of history into the same work will provide the best picture of an indigenous past. While many have worked to include native voices in scholarship, including Fienup-Riordan, the final product is still often controlled by the professional community of scholars, which raises questions about the purpose of indigenous histories.<sup>22</sup>

While non-native researchers struggle with the issues of including indigenous views, another challenge for writing the history of western Alaska is that only a small number of Yup'ik scholars have contributed to their own history. The few authors who have written about cultural history tend to focus on the negative cultural changes brought by outsiders. Harold Napoleon presents an interesting premise in his book *Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being*. This 1996 work details Yup'ik reactions to the epidemics caused by contact with whites. Napoleon argues that the influenza epidemic, brought by missionaries to the Eskimos in 1900, ended Yup'ik resistance to Christianity. He contends that, "As a result of epidemics, the Yup'ik world would go upside down; it would end." According to Napoleon, the influenza outbreak, which decimated Yup'ik populations throughout western Alaska, left the Eskimo culture shattered. Because the people were confused and frightened by the epidemic, they were easily manipulated by

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22 Yvon Csonka, "New Debates and New Orientations in Inuit Ethnohistory," *Schweizerische Amerikanisten-Gesellschaft Bulletin* 68 (2004): 15-21.

missionaries and school teachers, who taught the children to be ashamed of the old culture. The distraught adults who survived allowed missionaries and teachers to take over political power in villages. Napoleon makes the intriguing argument that the survivors of the disease epidemics developed post-traumatic stress disorder, which caused the high rates of alcoholism and drug abuse now prevalent among the Yup'ik people.<sup>23</sup> While Napoleon does not provide any historical evidence to support his argument and relies only on oral stories from family members, his work is thought-provoking and merits attention, because he represents an indigenous voice in the historiography of Yup'ik cultural change.

A more scholarly, yet similar, treatment of cultural change can be found in Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley's *A Yupiaq Worldview*, which focuses on the intersection of Western and Yup'ik values. In this 2006 work, Kawagley, a Yup'ik anthropologist and teacher, contends that the Yup'ik people initially resisted cultural change from outsiders because people were “sufficiently content” with their lifestyles. However, the Eskimos eventually accepted Western ideas and technology after being ravaged by diseases and forced into American-style education systems.<sup>24</sup> It is interesting that the few Yup'ik scholars tend to view cultural change as a completely Western-dominated event, with the Eskimos as passive recipients. On the other hand, outsiders tend to give the Yup'ik more agency in the process of cultural change.

There is no consensus among scholars about the exact impact of early epidemics on the Yup'ik people. Besides Napoleon's book, most published works only mention disease as part of broader treatments of Yup'ik history. Fienup-Riordan contends that “though the introduction of communicable diseases in the early 1800s damaged traditional social groups, authority structure,

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23 Harold Napoleon, *Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being* (Fairbanks, AK: University of Fairbanks Press, 1991), 10, 14.

24 Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley, *A Yupiaq Worldview: A Pathway to Ecology and Spirit*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 2006), 47, 52.



and patterns of intergroup relations in western Alaska, daily life proceeded much as in the years prior to the epidemic.”<sup>25</sup> Oswalt argues that early outbreaks of smallpox led the Yup'ik people to distrust Russians, but did not deter later interactions with foreigners.<sup>26</sup> One work that stands out is Dr. Robert Fortune's *Chills and Fever: Health and Disease in the Early History of Alaska*. Fortune compiled a concise history of the epidemics that swept across Alaska, from the time of contact with Europeans through the year 1900. While he treats the state as a whole, Fortune does provide valuable data and explanations for major epidemics in the western region, which proves useful in analyzing the impact of epidemics on the process of cultural change. He also rightly argues that “health and disease, despite their importance, have received scant attention from historians, anthropologists, and even physicians writing about Alaska.”<sup>27</sup>

A modern concern among Yup'ik people for cultural preservation will probably play a key role in the future literature on western Alaska; and there is much room for new and original scholarship. Although this introduction does not present a complete historiography of cultural studies, the list of Yup'ik scholarship is not lengthy. Anthropologists, archaeologists and ethnographers have completed the most useful studies of Yup'ik culture to date. However, with access to primary documents and a growing body of scholarly literature, the field is primed for more historical study.

## **Native Americans and Epidemic Diseases**

Yup'ik history merits attention because the people occupy a unique space within the history of indigenous groups. Contrary to the warfare, decimation, and removal experienced by

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25 Fienup-Riordan, *Real People*, 46.

26 Oswalt, *Bashful No Longer*, 68.

27 Robert Fortune, *Chills and Fever: Health and Disease in the Early History of Alaska* (Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 1992), 3.

other North American tribes, northern Alaskan natives were not subjected to military might, never signed formal treaties with foreign governments, and were generally left in possession of native lands until the 1950s.<sup>28</sup> Also, unlike many other Arctic Eskimo groups, the Yup'ik people have engaged in regular interactions with non-natives for only a little more than a century.

I argue here that while the Yup'ik Eskimos grappled with the devastating effects of introduced diseases, an experience shared by many indigenous groups around the world, they did not repudiate their shamans and traditional faith, which sets the Yup'ik people apart from other Native Americans. My analysis of specific features in Yup'ik society that allowed the people to maintain their traditional beliefs augments current scholarship on western Alaska's history. Also, Yup'ik responses to introduced diseases played a pivotal role in their interactions with Europeans, a story that has not yet been examined by other scholars.

Many North American tribes responded to the European-introduced diseases by rejecting conventional religious values. The Plateau Indians provide a contrary example of Native American reactions to epidemics. After an initial attempt to revive traditional beliefs following several devastating smallpox epidemics in the late eighteenth century, the Plateau Indians of the Northwest turned to Christianity, first blending the religion with their own, and then later fully adopting the Christian faith. Like the Yup'ik Eskimo shamans, Plateau shamans were historically tasked with curing illness. Smallpox struck the Plateau Indians in the 1770s and again in 1800, and their shamans could not help the people. Unlike the Yup'ik Eskimos, the Plateau Indians lost faith in their shamans. Traditional Plateau religion could not provide the Indians with a useful framework to interpret the widespread changes, including epidemic disease, dislocation, and cultural change, that accompanied the fur traders, missionaries and settlers who moved onto the

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28 Ernest S. Burch Jr., "The Ethnography of Northern North America: A Guide to Recent Research," *Arctic Anthropology* 16 (1979): 87.

plateau. According to Larry Cebula's 2003 book, *Plateau Indians and the Quest for Spiritual Power, 1700-1850*, the Plateau people developed a new traditional religious ritual called the Prophet Dance, a response to the epidemic diseases and to the fears of change as white people spread onto the plateau. The white traders who came to the plateau in the 1810s and 1820s brought impressive material goods and were not affected by the terrible epidemics, which led Plateau Indians to view white people as possessors of spiritual power. Cebula contends that the Columbian religion, a fusion of traditional spirituality and Christianity, grew out of the Indian desire to harness the mysterious spirit powers that white people seemed to possess. The Indians hoped to acquire this mysterious power, which granted immunity to epidemics and gave control over desirable trade goods, by adopting Christianity.<sup>29</sup>

Native Americans involved in the eastern Canadian fur trade also apparently discarded traditional spirituality in the face of epidemics, which provides a second contrary example to the Yup'ik Eskimos. Calvin Martin constructs an intriguing argument concerning the Micmac and Ojibwa responses to epidemic diseases in the early fur trade era in his work, *Keepers of the Game*. He contends that these upper Midwest and eastern Canadian Indians blamed animal spirits for sending epidemic diseases among the tribes. In retaliation, the people slaughtered fur-bearing animals mercilessly. The Micmac and Ojibwa shared similar beliefs with the Yup'ik Eskimos about spirit power and the shaman's spiritual role. These Native American groups believed that a spirit power infused every object or phenomena. To attract and harness this spiritual power required the proper observation of rituals and taboos. Hunters had to follow taboos surrounding the taking of game to avoid offending the animal spirits. If hunters over-exploited a specific animal population then the animal spirits might retaliate by causing illness among the hunter's

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<sup>29</sup> Larry Cebula, *Plateau Indians and the Quest for Spiritual Power, 1700-1850* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 37-39, 45, 48, 131-132.

tribe or by rendering the hunt unsuccessful. Shamans controlled the relationship between the physical and spiritual realms and mediated with spirits to prevent catastrophes. As in many other native cultures, the Micmac and Ojibwa shamans healed illness, which was frequently caused by offending the spirits or breaking taboos. The shamans' inability to cure epidemic disease led the Indians to conclude that the shamans had lost their ability to influence the animal spirits responsible for the disease. Martin argues that traditional relationships with the natural world broke down and, as the fur trade grew increasingly profitable, the Indians adopted "a position of uncompromising callousness towards Nature" and slaughtered the animals they blamed for the epidemics.<sup>30</sup>

Some critics dismiss Martin's argument due to some rather serious unsubstantiated assumptions in his interpretation. A particularly important point is that no evidence exists to prove Native groups actually believed that animal spirits punished taboo violations with sickness.<sup>31</sup> However, Martin does provide a creative and interesting hypothesis.

The Yup'ik Eskimos blamed Russian fur traders for importing epidemics to western Alaska. Other North American tribes also blamed Europeans for disease. Often, Native Americans interpreted initial interactions with Europeans within their existing religious systems and sometimes viewed the foreigners as supernatural beings. Only after prolonged contact did many tribes come to view Europeans as mortal human beings.<sup>32</sup> The Huron reaction to epidemic disease during the early contact period mirrors Yup'ik responses, although the eastern Canadian tribe reacted much more violently to the perceived strengths of missionary Jesuits. Some Huron

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30 Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 34-36, 38, 39, 53, 65, 72, 76.

31 Charles A. Bishop, "Review of *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade*," *American Anthropologist* 81, no. 4 (1979): 914.

32 Bruce Trigger, "Early Native North American Responses to European Contact: Romantic versus Rationalistic Interpretations," *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 4 (1991): 1210.

Indians accused Jesuit priests of being witches or sorcerers who brought disease to the people.<sup>33</sup> Others leveled accusations of witchcraft at tribal members who appeared unsocial. Sometimes these offenders were tortured and murdered. To cope with epidemics between 1634 and 1640, the Huron shamans followed traditional healing rituals to repel illness. When the shamans failed to stop the epidemics, they lost prestige among the Huron people. Over time, the Hurons developed deep suspicion of the Jesuit priests and believed they were powerful sorcerers bent on killing the tribes. One village reportedly refused any interaction or trade with the French in hope of halting the epidemics. Some people threatened to harm the Jesuits if they refused to stop practicing sorcery. Many associated baptism with witchcraft and death. However, the Hurons continued to trade with the French, despite deep fears of the Jesuits. Like the Yup'ik people, the Hurons also maintained faith in their traditional beliefs and shamans for some time.<sup>34</sup>

As in the experiences of so many other Native American groups, disease epidemics played an important role in the history of Yup'ik-white relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By developing a better understanding of how epidemics influenced Yup'ik views towards the fur traders, missionaries, and other people who came to western Alaska, historians can more clearly analyze the process of cultural change. The shamans are important characters in this story. Before contact with the Russians, the Yup'ik people relied on their shamans for physical and psychological healing. During Russian rule in western Alaska, the shamans maintained their influence over the people by leading the Yup'ik Eskimos to incorporate new diseases into their world view. Later, American missionaries and their western medicines brought enormous pressure onto the shamans to relinquish control. However, widespread disillusionment

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33 Elisabeth Tooker, *An Ethnography of the Huron Indians, 1615-1649*, Bureau of Ethnology Bulletin 190 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1964; repr., Midland, Ontario: Huronia Historical Development Council, 1967), 119. Citations are to the reprinted edition.

34 Bruce Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered* (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), 245-246, 247-249.

following the terrible influenza epidemic of 1900 encouraged the Yup'ik people to return to the shamans. The story of shamans and the colonial encounter is both thrilling and wrenching, and their experiences provide a window into the challenges facing the Yup'ik people as they wrestled with a changing world.

## **Chapter 2: The Real People**

In the time before people lived on the earth, the first man lay coiled up in a pea pod. On the fifth day Man stretched his legs and burst out of the pod. He landed on soft ground and began to move his arms and legs and examine himself. Man looked up and saw a dark shape approaching, which looked like a raven. It stopped in front of Man, pushed up its beak like a mask to the top of its head, and changed into a human. Raven was surprised to see Man and asked where he had come from. Man showed Raven the pea pod and Raven said that he had made the plant but did not know that Man would emerge from it. Raven flew away and came back four days later with two salmonberries and two heathberries for Man to eat. Raven led Man to a small creek and while he shaped birds, fish, and animals out of clay, explained to Man their various uses. Raven also made Woman out of clay and fastened water grass to the back of her head for hair. Soon the woman gave birth to a boy and Raven taught Man to feed and care for the child. Raven then showed Man the different seals he created and explained their names and habits. He also taught Man to create snares and other hunting skills. The woman gave birth again to a girl and she married her brother to populate the earth.

Raven returned to the pea pod and found that three other men had just emerged. He took the men to the coast, made them wives, and taught them how to live. Raven soon returned to the inland people, and told Man about the new humans who inhabited the seacoast. One day Man went out seal hunting on the coast. He saw many seals, but each time he would try to catch one it would slip away into the ocean. He stood up and felt a strange feeling as water began to run down his face. Man ran home and explained his strange feeling and, as his wife and son listened to the story, they too began to wail. In this way, people learned how to cry.

The village grew larger as the people followed Raven's directions. One day Raven took

Man up to visit the sky land, where Raven had made a beautiful country. Raven also took Man down to the bottom of the sea, where Raven crafted more animals, including the polar bear and walrus. When Man eventually returned home, he was astonished to see that many years had passed and his wife and son were both very old. The people welcomed Man back and bestowed upon him the position of headman. Man described his adventures with Raven to the villagers and he taught the young people. The villagers offered Raven a seat by Man, which was a place of honor, but he refused and sat on the floor with the humble people.<sup>1</sup>

This condensed version of the Yup'ik creation story comes from Edward William Nelson's massive ethnography of the Yup'ik Eskimos compiled between 1877 and 1881 while stationed at St. Michael, a coastal trading post. Nelson, a well-respected ethnologist and naturalist employed by the Smithsonian Institution, aimed to document traditional Yup'ik life. With the guidance of local men, he traveled by dogsled across much of western Alaska, visiting remote areas, taking detailed notes, and cataloging items that he purchased to take back to the Smithsonian Institution. Nelson observed that the Eskimos “possess an almost endless number of tales and legends, which express in many details their religious beliefs and convey in an interesting form an idea of their ancient customs and modes of thought.”<sup>2</sup>

The tales of the Yup'ik people do provide valuable insight into traditional Eskimo life, especially for scholars trying to interpret the process of cultural change. Assessing how Yup'ik Eskimos responded to introduced epidemic diseases requires an understanding of how people lived before contact with whites. Ethnographic materials, such as Nelson's work, and recent archaeological studies have contributed immensely to the reconstruction of pre-contact Yup'ik

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1 This is a shortened and paraphrased version of the Yup'ik creation story recorded in Edward William Nelson, “The Eskimo About Bering Strait,” in *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*. (Washington D.C.: Washington Government Printing Office, 1899), 452-462.

2 Ibid., 19, 450.



society. Oral histories collected by anthropologists also help explain traditional Eskimo belief systems, including attitudes towards health and disease, which is especially pertinent for this study. In a broader context, exploring Yup'ik history before the Russians arrived in the region can contradict commonly-held conceptions of peaceful Eskimos who somehow survived in a terribly harsh environment until the white people came along and destroyed their way of life. The Yup'ik people engaged in prolonged warfare prior to the arrival of the Russians, and their ancestors may have replaced a less technologically advanced group that occupied the region. Western Alaska is abundant in natural resources, which supported the growth of a large population. Shamans played a vital community role. They acted as religious leaders and also healed people, both physically and psychologically. The people of western Alaska were not disease-free before the Russians arrived. They suffered from a variety of ailments that healers attacked with practical medicines and spiritual treatments. The Yup'ik Eskimos developed a complex and rich culture that continues to be passed from generation to generation, even into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> The best place to begin a study of Yup'ik responses to introduced disease is with an examination of the Yup'ik world before contact with Europeans.

### **The Earliest Humans in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Region**

Archaeological work in western Alaska, which commenced in the 1930s, is not as extensive as other areas of the state. According to anthropologist Robert Shaw, “brief, small-scale, mostly individual efforts describe the archaeological research, giving it a patchy character.”

<sup>4</sup> Besides the logistical difficulties of reaching the isolated region, which is still only accessible

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3 Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries and Passages: Rule and Ritual in Yup'ik Eskimo Oral Tradition* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994).

4 Robert Shaw, “An Archaeology of the Central Yupik: A Regional Overview for the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, Northern Bristol Bay, and Nunivak Island,” *Arctic Anthropology* 35, no. 1 (1998): 236.

by boat or airplane, the Delta's physical environment creates serious challenges for archaeologists due to the heavily forested and unstable river banks.<sup>5</sup> Erosion along the ocean coast and in the region's river channels has degraded areas that were likely attractive to early human settlements.<sup>6</sup> However, excavations have uncovered enough artifacts for archaeologists to piece together a general outline of prehistory in the region.

Humans from Siberia first crossed the Bering land bridge and settled in the Americas by at least twelve thousand years ago. However, there is no archaeological evidence that these earliest inhabitants made their homes in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region.<sup>7</sup> Peoples associated with the Norton culture were probably the first to occupy western Alaska in permanent settlements.<sup>8</sup> The Norton tradition, which emerged across Alaska around 2,500 years ago, is characterized by coastal adaptation, increased dependence on marine resources, and slate grinding technology.<sup>9</sup> Compared to bearers of the preceding Arctic Small Tool tradition, Norton peoples had more permanent houses and were more sedentary. They relied on a variety of food and plants for sustenance, most importantly caribou, salmon, and sea mammals.<sup>10</sup> The Norton material culture also had more variability in stone tool types than Arctic Small Tool technologies, and included new elements like pottery and oil lamps.<sup>11</sup> Early Norton sites are located along desirable coastal locations and generally date from 2450 BP to 1450 BP in western Alaska.<sup>12</sup>

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5 James W. VanStone, "Mainland Southwest Alaska Eskimo" in *Arctic*, vol. 5, *Handbook of North American Indians*, ed. David Damas (Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., 1984), 228.

6 Dennis Griffin, "A History of Human Settlement on Nunivak Island, Alaska: Insights from Recent Investigations at Nash Harbor Village," *Arctic Anthropology* 39 no. 1/2 (2002): 55.

7 David J. Meltzer, *First Peoples in a New World: Colonizing Ice Age America*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 13.

8 Robert D. Shaw, "The Expansion and Survival of the Norton Tradition on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta," *Arctic Anthropology* 19 no. 2 (1982): 61.

9 Berkley B. Bailey, "The Archaeology of Hagemeister Island, western Alaska with Special Emphasis on the Eskimo Occupations at the Qikertarpak Site [XHI-016]" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1992), 21, 103.

10 Shaw, "Archaeology of the Central Yupik," 241.

11 Griffin, 54.

12 BP is a term to denote years before the present. Norton dates are from Robert D. Shaw and Charles E. Holmes, "The Norton Interaction Sphere: An Orientation," *Arctic Anthropology* 19 no. 2 (1982): 3.

Norton winter settlements were small, but by the late Norton period, the western coastal populations witnessed rapid growth as villages swelled and increased in number. Shaw credits the population explosion to the introduction of fishing nets, a highly efficient subsistence technology that would have allowed people to harvest massive numbers of fish in a short time frame. Around 2400 BP, Norton populations began to move onto previously undesirable coastal locations and spread to the wet tundra of the Delta over a few hundred years.<sup>13</sup>

Approximately one thousand years ago the Norton tradition peoples who occupied the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region were invaded by the technologically superior Thule culture, which swept down from northern Alaska. When the Thule culture arrived in western Alaska, Eskimo society underwent an obvious transformation. The Thule tradition is well documented by archaeologists, since evidence of the Thule presence stretches across wide coastal areas of western Alaska.<sup>14</sup> The first manifestations of Thule culture came from St. Lawrence Island and the adjacent Siberian coast. Anthropologist Don Dumond states that the Thule tradition encompassed “all the midden-burning, polished-slate-making, lamp-burning, kayak-and-umiak-paddling Eskimos of later times, who extended from Kodiak Island to Greenland.”<sup>15</sup> As the bearers of Thule culture moved south around 950 BP, they carried a maritime-oriented economy, with more specialized tool technologies, house forms, and ceramics. According to archaeologist Dennis Griffin, “the Thule represent the first true sea-oriented people, who were well adapted to the Arctic environment, and generalists when it came to subsistence.”<sup>16</sup> Archaeologists continue to deliberate over how Thule peoples spread across northern North America, and what role population movements played in either replacing or absorbing local Norton cultures.<sup>17</sup> The

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13 Shaw, “Archaeology of the Central Yupik,” 242.

14 Bailey, 29.

15 Don E. Dumond, *The Eskimos and Aleuts* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1987), 118.

16 Griffin, 58.

17 Dumond, 139.

mechanisms of how Thule culture spread across Alaska are still open to debate as well, and the process of cultural change may have been slow and peaceful or rapid and violent.

Some archaeologists have argued that Thule culture diffused through physical population dispersal. Good evidence exists that Thule peoples moved rapidly across the sparsely populated northern Arctic, spreading a uniform culture from northern Alaska to Greenland. The Thule people displaced or killed off earlier Dorset people in eastern Canada. One possible reason for the rapid eastern migration is that a warming climate allowed the Thule whale-hunters to spread into a new open-water environmental zone. However, some researchers contend that the Thule people became aware of iron and other metals in the eastern Arctic and moved east to exploit highly-desirable resources.<sup>18</sup> Dumond represents a counterpoint to the Thule physical expansion hypothesis by arguing that the strong continuity between some aspects of Norton and Thule culture in Alaska indicate that population replacement did not occur.<sup>19</sup> Archaeological work supports the cultural dispersal idea. Robert Shaw's excavations of an extensive and well-preserved midden pile at Manokinak, Alaska, led him to argue that the site, occupied by at least 1,300 years ago, displays strong evidence of a general cultural tradition from the earliest inhabitants through historic times.<sup>20</sup>

Based on current archaeological knowledge, we cannot definitively state whether or not Thule people always entered new areas by force. If Thule people spread south along the Alaskan

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18 Thule peoples made iron cutting blades, which were used to carve most antler, ivory, and wooden artifacts of early Eskimo technology. Robert McGhee, *The Last Imaginary Place: A Human History of the Arctic World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 119, 121-123; Allen P. McCartney, "Late Prehistoric Metal Use in the New World Arctic," in *The Late Prehistoric Development of Alaska's Native People*, ed. Robert D. Shaw, Roger K. Harritt and Don E. Dumond, 57-79 (Alaska Anthropological Association Monograph Series #4, 1998), 78.

19 Dumond, *Eskimos and Aleuts*, 127; Don E. Dumond, "The Prehistoric Pottery of western Alaska," *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska* 14, no. 2 (1969): 31.

20 Robert D. Shaw, "The Archaeology of the Manokinak Site: A Study of the Cultural Transition Between Late Norton Tradition and Historic Eskimo." Public-data File 85-63. (Fairbanks: Alaska Division of Geological and Geophysical Surveys, 1985), iv, 305.

coast to exploit marine resources, then they may have replaced existing Norton settlements in western Alaska, as their relatives did in eastern Canada. While estimating prehistoric populations numbers is difficult, up to fifteen thousand Yup'ik Eskimos may have inhabited the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta by the early 1800s.<sup>21</sup> Encountering a large regional population may have inhibited population replacement techniques like those employed on the isolated and small bands of Dorset people in eastern Canada. Also, motives for moving into western Alaska are much more difficult to uncover. The people in that area had no access to metals and whale-hunting was not commonly practiced in the region.<sup>22</sup> Thule culture could have spread through the trade routes that linked western Alaska to northern territories.

Regardless of the actual method of transition between cultures, the Thule tradition formed the basis of Yup'ik culture on the eve of foreign contact. Our knowledge of traditional Yup'ik social, economic, and political structures comes from the journals and reports of early visitors to the region. However, these records often only describe the visible surface of Eskimo life, since observers usually did not know the local language or devote themselves to lengthy visits at any particular village. Also, the inevitable cultural bias that accompanies the foreigner's impressions of a people are certainly present, sometimes glaringly so, in the primary sources. Despite the drawbacks, there is a wealth of information to be gleaned from both the written sources and oral histories that can provide insight into Yup'ik life prior to cultural intermixing with Europeans.

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21 Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays: Yup'ik Lives and How We See Them* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 9.

22 William W. Fitzhugh, William, "Persistence and Change in Art and Ideology in Western Alaskan Eskimo Cultures," in *The Late Prehistoric Development of Alaska's Native People*, ed. Robert D. Shaw, Roger K. Harritt and Don E. Dumond, 81-105 (Alaska Anthropological Association Monograph Series #4, 1988), 105.

***Yuk* (person) + *pik* (genuine or real) = *Yup'ik*, A real or genuine person.<sup>23</sup>**

Early visitors to western Alaska provided detailed physical descriptions of the Yup'ik Eskimos whom they encountered. Most described Eskimos of medium build with black hair and white or copper-colored skin tone.<sup>24</sup> Bernhard Bendel, who traveled along the Kuskokwim in 1870 as an agent for an American fur trading company, characterized the Yup'ik Eskimos as small, dirty and “clad in long robes made of squirrel skin which are artificially trimmed with beads, wolverine skin, etc. and evidently were very pretty when new, but now are so dirty, that one feels a tickling all over by merely looking at them.” The people wore boots made of seal or caribou skin and fur caps.<sup>25</sup> Women often tattooed their chins. Both men and women pierced their lips and noses and inserted small stones or glass beads.<sup>26</sup>

While many people, raised on Eskimo Pies and movies like *Nanook of the North*, may imagine that Eskimos spent their lives huddled in igloos while blizzards raged and polar bears roamed outside during an endless winter darkness, this characterization does not fit the Yup'ik Eskimos.<sup>27</sup> Since the Delta region lies below the Arctic Circle, the Eskimos did not suffer through months of darkness and frigid temperatures like others who occupied areas further north. The shortest December days have five hours of sunlight, and, although winter temperatures can dip to -80 degrees Fahrenheit, July temperatures can reach 80 degrees Fahrenheit. The summer season

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23 From the Central Yupik Language. Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays*, 5.

24 Korsakovskiy, Petr and Ivan Ya. Vasilev. *Russian Exploration in Southwest Alaska: The Travel Journals of Petr Korsakovskiy (1818) and Ivan Ya. Vasilev (1829)*, ed. James W. VanStone, trans. David H. Kraus. (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1988), 30, 46; L.A. Zagoskin, *Lieutenant Zagoskin's Travels in Russian America, 1842-1844*, ed. Henry N. Michael (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 211.

25 Bernhard Bendel, *1870 Kuskokwim Expedition*, ed. Kurt H. Vitt, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Anchorage: Cornelia Fitger, 1989), 33.

26 Ferdinand Petrovich Wrangell, *Russian America: Statistical and Ethnographic Information*, trans. Mary Sadouski. (Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press, 1980), 61; V.S. Kromchenko, “V.S. Kromchenko's Coastal Explorations in western Alaska, 1822,” *Fieldiana: Anthropology*, 64, ed. James W. VanStone, trans. David H. Kraus, (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1973), 53.

27 For a revealing discussion of Eskimo stereotypes in popular culture see Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Freeze Frame: Alaska Eskimos in the Movies* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995).

lasts about three months, beginning in mid-April.<sup>28</sup> The coastal Eskimos subsisted on a wide variety of sea mammals like seals, walrus, and beluga whales, as well as birds and small land mammals like otter, fox, and mink.<sup>29</sup> Riverine Eskimos relied on bear, moose and caribou.<sup>30</sup> Fish was an especially important food for all Eskimos, who prepared and stored the meat in various forms, “boiled, pickled, fried, iced or shredded, and dried.”<sup>31</sup> The people used bows and arrows, fishing nets, and traps to catch their food.<sup>32</sup> Plants were also a part of the Yup'ik diet, either eaten raw or added to soups as flavoring.<sup>33</sup> Anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan credits the rich bounty of available foods for allowing the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta to support the biggest Eskimo population in the world.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the wealth of resources and their preparations for the long winters, the Eskimos often faced starvation conditions in the early spring due to unpredictable environmental conditions, such as prolonged ice or winter weather, or unforeseen fluctuations in animal populations.<sup>35</sup> The Yup'ik Eskimos supplemented their subsistence lifestyle with trade goods obtained from participation in a complex system of inter-regional trade extending from the coast of western Siberia to modern-day Canada.<sup>36</sup> They received trade goods such as iron, personal adornments, and animal skins.<sup>37</sup>

Families moved seasonally between the winter village, a tundra camp, and a fish camp,

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28 Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays*, 6.

29 Kromchenko, 53; Zagoskin 219, 222.

30 Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays*, 9.

31 Zagoskin, 222.

32 Ibid., 220.

33 Wendell Oswalt, “A Western Eskimo Ethnobotany,” *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska* 6, no. 1 (1957): 20.

34 Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays*, 9.

35 Zagoskin, 211; Nelson, 298.

36 Ernest S. Burch, “Overland Travel Routes in Northwest Alaska,” *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska* 18, no. 1 (1976):

37 Wendell Oswalt, *Bashful No Longer: An Alaskan Eskimo Ethnohistory, 1778-1988* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 22.

which allowed them to best utilize local resources.<sup>38</sup> At the permanent winter villages, women and children lived in sod homes, while the men occupied a communal house. The winter settlements ranged in size from 50 to 250 related individuals, while summer camps would be occupied by smaller family groups.<sup>39</sup> Usually the various settlements were within about thirty miles of each other. Each family functioned as an independent economic and political unit, however the exchange of women, food, names, and feasting served to bind families together into larger regional groupings that could be leaned upon in times of famine or war.<sup>40</sup>

The Yup'ik people likely relied heavily on their regional groups during a period of intense and devastating warfare in western Alaska known as the Bow and Arrow Wars. Oral traditions throughout the region attribute the origin of warfare to an incident where one boy accidentally blinded another. The blinded boy's father retaliated by poking out the eyes of the offender, and then the conflict escalated until the entire region descended into war.<sup>41</sup> The Bow and Arrow Wars may have begun during the transition between Norton and Thule culture.<sup>42</sup> Often, cultural transitions are marked by periods of increased violence. According to Caroline Funk, who mined oral history recordings by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the beginning of the conflict was “deep enough in the past that it is considered a constant way of life in the oral histories.”<sup>43</sup> However archaeological evidence cannot definitively prove when the warfare began. Oral traditions indicate to Funk that resource conflict may have been an initial cause of the war.<sup>44</sup>

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38 Zagoskin, 219.

39 Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays*, 9.

40 Ann Fienup-Riordan, “Regional Groups on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta,” *Études inuit. Inuit studies* 8, no.3 (1984): 68, 64, 87; Zagoskin, 222.

41 Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays*, 153-4.

42 Bow and arrow technology had long been part of Arctic life. J. L. Giddings identified bow and arrow artifacts as part of the Arctic Small Tool tradition during his excavations at Cape Denbigh. The Arctic Small Tool tradition appeared in the Arctic region around 4000 BP. See J.L. Giddings, *The Archeology of Cape Denbigh* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1964), 30-31.

43 The Bureau of Indian Affairs recorded oral histories as part of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act investigations from the late 1970s to the early 1990s.

44 Caroline Funk, “The Bow and Arrow War Days on the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta of Alaska,” *Ethnohistory* 57, no.



During the Bow and Arrow Wars, the men's ceremonial house, known as the *qasgiq*, also functioned as the “war room,” where men would “lobby their cause, organize warring parties, and revel in the distinction of successful campaigns.”<sup>45</sup> The informal, yet highly important leadership position in the *qasgiq*, called *nukulpiagtak*, developed from “the time of wars,” according to one elderly man in the village of Nunapitchuk. The *nukulpiagtak* was consulted in important village affairs and directed wartime strategy and logistics.<sup>46</sup>

Outside of wartime, there was no formalized leadership roles in Yup'ik communities. Russian naval captain V.S. Kromchenko, who sailed up the western Alaska coast in 1822, noted that a chief of Nunivak Island “although revered, does not seem to have any authority, for he wears the same kind of clothing and ornaments as the lowliest of his subjects and his subjects do not respond to his commands. For the most part, it would appear that they follow only [his] advice and often laugh at him; from this one may conclude that if their chiefs do govern them it is not by sovereign power but by experience and intelligence.”<sup>47</sup> L.A. Zagoskin, another naturalist and ethnographer who loved exploring unknown lands, spent 1843 through 1844 in the Yukon and Kuskokwim regions. He noted that the Eskimos believed that everyone should contribute to the well-being of the community and men earned respect by giving freely to others in need.<sup>48</sup> Elders acted as leaders and worked together to promote harmony within their communities.<sup>49</sup>

The *qasgiq*, or ceremonial men's house, was an integral part of pre-contact Yup'ik culture

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4 (2010): 528, 535, 537.

45 Lisa Frink, “A Tale of Three Villages: Archaeological Investigation of Late Prehistoric and Historic Culture Change in Western Alaska” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 2003), 253.

46 Elizabeth F. Andrews, *The Akulmiut: Territorial Dimensions of a Yup'ik Eskimo Society*, Technical Paper No. 177, (Juneau, Alaska: Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Subsistence, 1989), 39, 103; John Kilbuck, *The Yup'ik Eskimos: As Described in the Travel Journals and Ethnographic Accounts of John and Edith Kilbuck who served with the Alaska Mission of the Moravian Church, 1886-1900*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan, (Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press, 1988), 22.

47 Kromchenko, 62.

48 Zagoskin, 222.

49 Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries and Passages*, 200.

and served as the center of village political and ceremonial life. Whether this important cultural institution originated in the late Norton or early Thule period is still uncertain, although archaeological findings indicate that some type of larger dwellings began to appear in late Norton sites, which could be early examples of the *qasgiq*.<sup>50</sup> While staying at St. Michael, Zagoskin described the local *qasgiq* as “proof of the great age of native settlement in this area- the logs of which the benches are made, sometimes over 2 ½ feet in width, hardly show where they were split and hewn with stone axes, so smoothed and polished are they by generations of villagers.” Visitors were received in the *qasgiq* and the building was the place where “all councils are held and decisions made on communal matters.”<sup>51</sup>

Winter villages each contained at least one *qasgiq* and larger settlements could have several. The semi-subterranean *qasgiq* was constructed with driftwood logs that were covered with grass or bark slabs and then a layer of sod. The *qasgiqs* had a large fire pit in the center of the main room and rows of benches along the walls. In the ceiling above the fire pit a skylight with a removable gut cover would provide some weak light.<sup>52</sup> John Kilbuck, a Moravian missionary who started the Bethel mission on the Kuskokwim River in 1886, recorded that *qasgiqs* were generally “25 to 40 feet square at the base and taper off on all sides to a height of 18 to 25 feet.”<sup>53</sup> Underground tunnels often connected the *qasgiqs* to sod family homes, where women and children lived. Lisa Frink, who conducted excavations at three historically-occupied village sites around the modern village of Chevak between 1998 and 2001, postulates that tunnels likely served as a way for men to meet quickly in the *qasgiq* and as a way for people to move

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50 Hiroaki Okada, et al., *The Qaluyaarmiut: an Anthropological Survey of the western Alaska Eskimos* (Faculty of Letters, Hokkaido University, Sapporo, Japan, 1982), 9-10; Bruce J. Lutz, “An Archaeological Karigi at the Site of UngaLaqLiq, Western Alaska.” *Arctic Anthropology* 10, no. 1 (1973): 116-117.

51 Zagoskin, 115.

52 Wendell Oswalt, *Bashful No Longer*, 18-19.

53 Kilbuck, 13.

around during a long enemy siege.<sup>54</sup> Anywhere from four to twelve women and children would occupy the sod houses, where cooking, sewing, and other domestic activities took place.<sup>55</sup>

The *qasgiq* was the domain of men. According to Oswalt, “the life stages of a male were symbolized by the location of the bench on which he slept, worked, or rested in the *qasgiq*.”<sup>56</sup>

Men spent most of their time in the *qasgiq*, where they told stories, played games, and took sweatbaths. Also, men would make tools, eat, and sleep in the *qasgiq*. Kilbuck wrote that “the first rule governing life in the Kashigi [*qasgiq*] is respect for the place, loud conversation, boisterousness, quarreling and scuffling are all tabooed, and a fine is imposed on delinquents.” While women taught girls the rules that governed their lives in the family home, the *qasgiq* was a place for elders to teach younger men the rules of living and to give advice on hunting and family life.<sup>57</sup>

Visitors to the region provided vivid descriptions of Eskimo sweatbaths, which were the central daily activity in the *qasgiq*. According to H.M.W. Edmonds, who wintered at St. Michael in 1890, fires were built in a large hole under the floorboards in the center of the *qasgiq*, and “the heat from this burning pile of wood is great and almost unendurable” as the “very walls are too hot to touch.” After “perspiring profusely,” the men would often run outside. In the winter they might roll around in the snow and during the summer jump into nearby water.<sup>58</sup> William Dall of the Western Union Telegraph Company also recorded the experience of watching Yup'ik men take sweatbaths. As the men sweated they would bathe themselves with “an unmentionable liquid,” urine, which Dall admitted was surprisingly effective in cleansing the body.<sup>59</sup>

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54 Frink, 244.

55 Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries and Passages*, 37.

56 Oswalt, *Bashful*, 19.

57 Kilbuck, 19, 37.

58 H.W. Edmonds, “The Eskimo of St. Michael and Vicinity as Related by H.M.W. Edmonds,” ed. Dorothy Jean Ray, *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska* 13, no.2 (1966): 32.

59 William H. Dall, *Alaska and its Resources*, (Boston, MA: Lee and Shepard, 1870; repr., New York: Arno Press

Important festivals took place in the *qasgiq*, including the Great Feast to the Dead, which honored deceased relatives with elaborate gift exchanges, singing, and dancing. At such celebrations all community members would gather in the *qasgiq*.<sup>60</sup> Some festivals required the gathering of whole regional groups. The Yup'ik Eskimos are well known for the richness of their ceremonies, which featured impressive staging effects, dancing, drama, humor, and complex symbolism.<sup>61</sup> All ceremonies had religious significance for the Eskimos, such as the Bladder Festival, which honored the spirits of sea mammals to ensure their return the following year.<sup>62</sup>

The spiritual lives of the Eskimos extended far beyond the walls of the *qasgiq*. Traditional rules for living affected every person and every facet of Yup'ik life and were closely tied to Yup'ik spirituality. These traditional rules, known as *qanruyutet*, included acting with compassion, helping others who were in need, and avoiding private and public conflict. The Yup'ik people believed that the mind was inherently powerful and positive actions would generate good outcomes. On the other hand, if a person acted selfishly or lashed out in anger, he or she might injure another person's mind and produce dangerous consequences. Careful regulations of individual actions played a crucial role in the Yup'ik belief system. Ellam Yua, the Person of the Universe, constantly watched people and would reprimand those who did not follow the rules and instead followed their own desires and thoughts. By heeding the *qanruyutet*, a person would enjoy a long and healthy life.<sup>63</sup>

To the Yup'ik people, everything in the universe was aware: plants, animals, bones, dirt, water. In a 1995 interview with Fienup-Riordan, Yup'ik elder Paul John described a shaman who

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Inc., 1970), 20. Citations are to the reprinted edition.

60 William W. Fitzhugh and Susan A. Kaplan, *Inua: The Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982), 162.

61 Oswalt, *Bashful*, 36. For descriptions of dances see Wrangell, 66.

62 Zagoskin, 123.

63 Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Wise Words of the Yup'ik People: We Talk to You Because We Love You*. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 48, 54, 62.

overheard some needlefish bones complaining about people always stepping on them, so the bones were contemplating revenge by stomping on the people.<sup>64</sup> Animals would only come to a hunter who was thoughtful and careful in his actions.<sup>65</sup> The natural world was closely bound to the supernatural sphere.<sup>66</sup> Fienup-Riordan contends that “a Yup'ik person comes into the world as part of a complex web of kinship, including both the living and the dead. One always considers others and, for better or worse, reaps the consequences.” After a death, the family would restrict activity for five days, until the deceased had reached the land of the dead. There were rules governing activity of mourners such as not using needles to avoid cutting the dead person's path, and some wore special belts. A newborn child would be given the name of a recently deceased family member, and the spirit of the dead relative was thought to enter the child.<sup>67</sup>

Shamans had an important role in village life; they were respected and sometimes feared because of their close ties to the supernatural. As the most powerful religious person in a village, the shaman saw everyone defer to his judgment. Nelson, who visited many Yup'ik villages, wrote that the Eskimos “have great faith in the power and wisdom of the shamans, who are the highest authority, to whom all questions of religion and the mysteries of the invisible world are referred.”<sup>68</sup> To be well-respected leaders, shamans had to be both knowledgeable and articulate, and, most importantly, speak on behalf of the community. Wealth or hunting ability were not necessarily prerequisites for leadership.<sup>69</sup> Kromchenko observed that the Eskimos on Stuart Island, just off the coast near St. Michael, relied on their shaman during a bartering session and “showed some respect for him in our presence.”<sup>70</sup> Often a shaman's child inherited the position, although any

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64 Ibid., 43

65 Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries and Passages*, 190.

66 Oswalt, *Bashful*, 35.

67 Fienup-Riordan, *Wise Words*, 54, 108, 275.

68 Nelson, 428.

69 Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays*, 203.

70 Kromchenko, 71.

youngster who distinguished himself or herself as special or different could be trained as a shaman's apprentice. Shamans were usually men, although women could also act as shamans.<sup>71</sup> While generally a rigid separation defined gender roles in Yup'ik society, the shaman often occupied an ambiguous position. A male shaman would not hunt and often slept in the sod homes of the women.<sup>72</sup> However, the shaman was also tasked with assisting the hunters. In some oral traditions the shaman would travel to the moon at night and influence land animals to come down to earth to be hunted.<sup>73</sup> According to Yup'ik elder John Paul, "some shamans worked on the path of the fish the people were going to use. It is said they were clearing the path for the fish. And then the [*angalkut*] who are able to would go down into the ocean during the winter to make a request for plenty of seals or other sea mammals, so that springtime would bring an abundance when men went out sea-mammal hunting."<sup>74</sup>

Shamans made sure that villagers followed the complex system of social and economic taboos because personal or village-wide disaster could follow the breaking of these rules.<sup>75</sup> Some taboos centered on subsistence practices. Zagoskin reported that the Eskimos would not use a hatchet or iron pickax to break the ice for fishing because the fish would not come near the ice-hole.<sup>76</sup> Other taboos were gender, age, or situation specific, such as prohibitions surrounding menstruation, limiting water intake for boys, or restricting hunting practices for a man who had recently lost a relative.<sup>77</sup>

According to Nelson, any person could exhibit supernatural powers such as prophecy,

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71 Wendell Oswalt, *Mission of Change in Alaska: Eskimos and Moravians on the Kuskokwim* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1963), 86.

72 Wrangell, 65.

73 Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries and Passages*, 307.

74 Ann Fienup-Riordan, "Metaphors of Conversion, Metaphors of Change," *Arctic Anthropology* 34, no. 1 (1997):105.

75 Oswalt, *Mission of Change*, 86, 89.

76 Zagoskin, 224.

77 Phyllis Morrow, "A Woman's Vapor: Yupik Bodily Powers in Southwest Alaska," *Ethnology*, 41, no. 4 (2002): 338.

clairvoyance, or control supernatural beings.<sup>78</sup> However, the shamans acted as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual worlds. Shamans could travel to the underground land of the dead to communicate with spirits there. They also had invisible helping spirits that would accompany them to the spiritual plane.<sup>79</sup> Yup'ik elder John Paul said, “*Angalkut* [shamans] were the scientists of our ancestors. With their extrasensory perception they could tell what the future held for others.”<sup>80</sup> Zagoskin witnessed shamans perform dances that described their interactions with spirits, “and as the spirit appears in the shape of an animal, a bird, a man, or some other fantastic form, the shaman presents this with a mask together with his dance.”<sup>81</sup> Shamans often carved the symbolic masks that were vital to many Yup'ik ceremonial dances. The masks represented spirits that the shaman saw during visions.<sup>82</sup>

Many stories in Yup'ik oral history attest to the prophetic powers of shamans. One well-known story from oral traditions in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta area concerns a shaman named Issiisaayuq, who predicted the coming of white people to the area. He directed the people of his village to carve a mask that showed a freight ship. Although the people did not know what a freight ship was, they proceeded to carve onto the mask a picture of a boat with three masts. The next summer an identical ship arrived at the Kuskokwim River. The shaman warned the people to avoid the ship but many traded goods anyway. The ship then sailed away and everyone's new items disappeared. The next summer a real freight ship arrived, just as the shaman had prophesied.<sup>83</sup> In another story, the shaman Issiisaayuq became well-known as a healer after he began to use his powers to restore health in fellow villagers.<sup>84</sup>

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78 Nelson, 427.

79 Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries and Passages*, 305.

80 Fienup-Riordan, “Metaphors of Conversion,” 105.

81 Zagoskin, 226.

82 Margaret Lantis, *Alaskan Eskimo Ceremonialism* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1947), 86, 90.

83 Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays*, 50.

84 Frank Andrew, *Paitarkiukenka: My Legacy to You*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan, trans. Alice Rearden and Marie

While the shamans fulfilled many functions in Yup'ik society, one of the most important was to cure illnesses.<sup>85</sup> The Yup'ik people traditionally viewed illness as a result of incorrect actions. If a person lived a good life then illness would not easily affect him or her. However, if a person failed to follow the traditional rules for living then sickness could invade the body. In essence, each person was responsible for his or her own well-being. Once people became sick, then only by caring for their bodies, thinking good thoughts, and following the rules, could they become healthy again.<sup>86</sup> However, the Eskimos also attributed sickness to other causes. Shamans could cause illnesses. If many people died in a village at once it might be due to bewitching or witchcraft by a shaman from another village.<sup>87</sup> If someone died suddenly, without suffering any type of illness, then a shaman may be responsible.<sup>88</sup> Extreme emotional grief, such as losing a family member, could also create sickness. Exposure to unclean influences, such as invisible vapors that could descend onto people, led to sickness, which the Eskimos combated with active lifestyles to “shake off” the sickness.<sup>89</sup>

There were a variety of common diseases and ailments among the Yup'ik Eskimos before contact with outsiders, although the early Russian and American accounts generally label the Eskimos as quite healthy and vigorous.<sup>90</sup> Zagoskin claimed to be “fortunate enough not to have encountered a dangerously ill person in any of the places that I visited in the course of two years.”<sup>91</sup> Descriptions of skin diseases are prominent in early accounts by Russian visitors to

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Mead (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008), 327.

85 Oswalt, *Mission of Change*, 86.

86 Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries and Passages*, 189-90.

87 Nelson, 422.

88 J.A.H. Hartmann, “Diary of an Exploratory Journey to Alaska,” in *Periodical Accounts Relating to the Missions of the Church of the United Brethren*, vol. 33 (London: Brethren Society, 1884), 256.

89 Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries and Passages*, 190.

90 Ferdinand Petrovich Wrangell, “The Inhabitants of the Northwest Coast of America,” *Arctic Anthropology* 6, no. 2 (1970): 19; Korsakovskiy, 47; Berthold Seemann, *Narrative of the Voyage of H.M.S. Herald During the Years 1845-51*. Vol. II. (London: Reeve and Co., 1853), 8.

91 Zagoskin, 110.



western Alaska. However, while skin diseases were likely quite common among Eskimos, the visibility of such conditions may partly account for the extent of their descriptions in the primary sources.<sup>92</sup> Zagoskin found that abscesses and eye diseases were especially prevalent among the Eskimos.<sup>93</sup> F.P. Wrangell, a manager of the Russian-American Company, observed that rheumatism, chest complaints and abscesses were the most common illnesses.<sup>94</sup> He also noted that broken bones and boils were common.<sup>95</sup> Kromchenko noticed that the Eskimos on Stuart Island had deep sores covering their skin.<sup>96</sup> Berthold Seemann, who traveled along the Alaskan shore in 1848, noted few diseases among the natives of Norton Sound. The most common injury was sores, and few people had physical deformities.<sup>97</sup> There is some evidence that western Alaskan Eskimos sometimes contracted parasitic diseases from animals such as dogs and foxes.<sup>98</sup> Zagoskin noted that consumption, or tuberculosis, was prominent among the Eskimos, although the illness was possibly introduced through contact with the Russians. The Eskimos had weak lungs, according to Zagoskin, and that “it is the exceptional one who does not cough blood by the time he is 20.”<sup>99</sup> In his studies of skeletal remains, anthropologist Aleš Hrdlička found no evidence of tuberculosis in any people whose deaths predated the Russian arrival, which led him to conclude that the Russians introduced disease was introduced to the region. Generally, the pre-contact Eskimos did not live especially long, according to Hrdlička, who collected a large number of Eskimo skeletons while visiting the Kuskokwim region in 1930. He noted that there

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92 Robert Fortune, *Chills and Fever: Health and Disease in the Early History of Alaska* (Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 1992), 63.

93 Zagoskin, 110.

94 Wrangell, *Russian America*, 68.

95 Wrangell, “Inhabitants of the Northwest Coast,” 19.

96 Kromchenko, 71.

97 Seemann, 67.

98 Robert Fortune, “Early Evidence of Infections Among Alaskan Natives,” *Alaska History* 2, no. 1 (1986/7): 42-43.

99 Zagoskin, 225.

were few remains of elderly people in his collection.<sup>100</sup>

Later American observers generally pointed to an unhealthy appearance among the Eskimos.<sup>101</sup> Bernhard Bendel characterized the Eskimos he encountered as “ill-looking.”<sup>102</sup> Nelson believed that “the constant wetting and exposure” decreased the Eskimos' ability to withstand disease, “as a result, consumption and rheumatic complaints are common, and but a few live to an advanced age.”<sup>103</sup> In the winter of December 1878 through January 1879, Nelson traveled across 1,200 miles between the Yukon and Kuskokwim rivers, from the ocean well into the interior. He noticed that “skin diseases are quite common, and a large number of the children are sickly, showing a peculiar pasty complexion.”<sup>104</sup> William Dall observed that lung disease was particularly prevalent among the Eskimos of the Yukon River, which he blamed on tobacco use.<sup>105</sup> Moravian missionary John Kilbuck noted that people suffered from lung and heart troubles, sore eyes, and skin sores.<sup>106</sup>

Beyond the descriptions of travelers in the region, traditional medicines can also shed some light on what types of health problems most often confronted the Eskimos. Margaret Lantis compiled a detailed description of traditional medical practices based on extensive interviews with Yup'ik elders. She found that plants were commonly used to heal a variety of complaints, from stomach troubles to ear aches to general wounds. Yup'ik elders recounted a number of

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100Aleš Hrdlička, *Anthropological Work on the Kuskokwim River, Alaska* (Washington D.C.:Smithsonian Institute, 1931), 132; There is skeletal evidence that tuberculosis was present among some Native American populations before contact with Europeans. See the article by Donald J. Ortner and Mary Lucas Powell, “Paleopathology” in *Environment, Origins, and Population*, vol. 3, *Handbook of North American Indians*, ed. Douglas H. Ubelaker (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institute, 2006).

101Dall, 225; George Gordon, “Notes on the Western Eskimo,” *University of Pennsylvania Transactions of the Department of Archeology Free Museum of Science and Art*, vol. II, part I (Philadelphia, PA: John C. Winston Co., 1906), 71.

102Bendel, 32.

103Nelson, 29.

104Edward Nelson, *A Sledge Journey in the Delta of the Yukon, Northern Alaska* (London: Royal Geographic Society, 1882), 10-11.

105Dall, 224.

106Kilbuck, 98.

remedies for snow blindness, indicating that it was a common occurrence, including blood-letting, or washing the eyes with cranberry juice, human urine, or human milk. Interestingly, remedies for diarrhea, worms, poisoning, and fever were not known to the elders whom Lantis questioned in her research.<sup>107</sup>

Ancient skeletal remains also contribute to our knowledge of health and disease among pre-contact Eskimos. In a study of numerous skeletal samples from native Alaskans, anthropologist Anne Keenleyside learned that Eskimos suffered a variety of health problems before contact with Europeans. Both Eskimo and Aleut skeletons show evidence of anemia, trauma, infection, and several forms of dental pathology.<sup>108</sup> The frozen body of an elderly Eskimo woman from St. Lawrence Island, discovered in the 1970s, dates to approximately 1,600 years ago. The doctors who examined her remains concluded that she must have been trapped in her home by a landslide or earthquake and buried alive. The body was in a remarkable state of preservation, which allowed for extensive testing. Results showed evidence of moderate scoliosis and coronary artery disease. The woman also suffered from lung disease, which was likely caused by a lifetime of exposure to open cooking fires.<sup>109</sup>

Our understanding of pre-contact disease is unfortunately incomplete, due to limitations in the primary source records, evolving oral traditions about medical treatment, and a general lack of archaeological data. However, to recognize that the Eskimos suffered from a variety of illnesses before the Europeans arrived in western Alaska is important. As Doctor Robert Fortuine rightly argues, we must all remember that Europeans “do not have a monopoly on all the

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107Margaret Lantis, “Folk Medicine and Hygiene Lower Kuskokwim and Nunivak-Nelson Island Areas,” *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska* 8, no. 1 (1959): 8-9, 13-16.

108Anne Keenleyside, “Skeletal Evidence of Health and Disease in Pre-Contact Alaskan Eskimos and Aleuts,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 107 (1998): 51.

109Michael R. Zimmerman and George S. Smith, “A Probable Case of Accidental Inhumation of 1,600 Years Ago,” *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 51, (July-August 1975): 828, 835.

unpleasant diseases to which mankind is heir.”<sup>110</sup> The available evidence does indicate that the Yup'ik people were not familiar with epidemic diseases like smallpox, syphilis, measles, and likely tuberculosis and influenza, which would dramatically impact their lives after contact with Europeans.

Treatment varied depending on the nature of the illness. Generally, the first response to illness involved application of home treatments, such as plants, animal products, or fumigation, to relieve symptoms of pain or swelling and heal sores. Sometimes people would employ blood-letting to “relieve inflamed or aching portions of the body.”<sup>111</sup> Eskimos were pragmatic in explaining and attending to minor illnesses and accidents. Usually elders who achieved reputations for doctoring would be called upon to gather appropriate plants, prepare teas, and consult on illnesses.<sup>112</sup> Russian-American Company employee and explorer of western Alaska, Ivan Vasilev, reported to Wrangell that both the shamans and elderly women treated the sick.<sup>113</sup> Generally, the shaman would be requested only when “strong, generalized and often well-justified fear was aroused without any practical means of dealing with the disease or its attendant anxiety.”<sup>114</sup> The crucial role that shamans played in the curing process is well-attested to in the primary sources. In an 1847 journal entry, Russian Orthodox missionary Father Netsvetov observed that “shamanism is employed among them primarily during illness and is considered to be the best form of healing.”<sup>115</sup> Nelson reported that the Eskimos most commonly treated diseases by having shamans “perform certain incantations.”<sup>116</sup>

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110Fortune, “Early Evidence of Infections Among Alaskan Natives,” 40.

111Nelson, *Eskimo about Bering Strait*, 30.

112Lantis, “Folk Medicine,” 3.

113Wrangell, *Russian America*, 68.

114Lantis, “Folk Medicine,” 3.

115Iakov Netsvetov, *The Journals of Iakov Netsvetov: The Yukon Years, 1845-1863*, trans. Lydia T. Black, ed.

Richard A. Pierce (Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press, 1984), 69.

116Nelson, *Eskimo about Bering Strait*, 309.

Some lucky visitors to western Alaska were able to witness shamanistic treatments. To treat the unfortunate Stuart Islanders, whose skins were covered in open sores, Kromchenko observed that the shaman “contrives some sort of medicines,” and then “casts a spell on the wound.”<sup>117</sup> Zagoskin described how a man suffering from a cold and rheumatic pains received treatment from a female shaman and four assistants. The sick man sat in a corner of the *qasgiq*. Two men stood beside him beating drums while lamps provided dim, flickering light. The shaman sang animal sounds. Zagoskin wrote that “when she runs into difficulties or sees that she is not meeting with success she changes her voice, chatters like a magpie, barks like a dog, and, finally, she sets to howling like a wolf,” until finally, she pulled a spirit from the ill man. The shaman threw the spirit into the air, grabbed a broom and chased the unseen entity through the *qasgiq*. The skylight opened and four men sitting on the roof of the *qasgiq* banged their drums and sang. The shaman, having successfully expelled the spirit from the patient, fainted. Zagoskin reported that the shaman had removed three spirits from the ill man, and if all the spirits had now fled, then the man would recover. If not, “the shamanizing continues as long as he [the patient] wishes, presumably, since he is the one who pays for it.”<sup>118</sup> Shamans sometimes used naming ceremonies to cure sick people. If a person became ill around the same time that someone else died, it might be because he or she wanted to be named after the dead person. The shaman would brush the patient's body and mention the name of a deceased person to draw the dead spirit to the body.<sup>119</sup>

Shamans could also be called upon to cure mental illness. Yup'ik elder Frank Andrew said in an August 2002 interview that sickness is “aware” and enjoys occupying a person who submits to it. According to oral tradition, the shamans would function as counselors and encourage people

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<sup>117</sup>Kromchenko, 71.

<sup>118</sup>Zagoskin, 226.

<sup>119</sup>Fienup-Riordan, *Wise Words*, 109.

to speak about mental illness, which would cause it to be embarrassed and flee. Yup'ik elder David Martin told Fienup-Riordan in a 2001 interview, “Even though they did not speak on their own sometimes, an *angalkuq* [shaman] could change the minds of those who did not speak of their bad experience by having them speak about it in front of people in the *qasgiq*. They let a lot of people hear. They say that some people heal when they finally reveal their experience.” In a 1995 interview, Paul John recounted a story of a man who became sick from keeping a secret. He said, “An *angalkuq* worked on him while he sat in the middle of the *qasgiq* in front of everyone. Using his power, the *angalkuq* changed himself into a trusted friend and made the sick person believe that the two of them were all alone. The *angalkuq* asked what he was hiding and allowed him to talk about it.” After expressing his feelings to the shaman, the man became well again.<sup>120</sup>

The Yup'ik people occupied a dynamic world, both spiritually and physically. Their careful rules for living and rich ceremonial lives reflected the bountiful, yet unpredictable, world around them. Illness and disease were a part of Yup'ik life, and treatments were chosen based on the type of the ailment. The shamans played a crucial role in treating sicknesses that were outside the bounds of normal, and their skills would be severely tested when new and deadly epidemics arrived in the region in the mid-eighteenth century.

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<sup>120</sup>Ibid., 52.

### Chapter 3: Gifts from Russian America: Smallpox, Religion, and Tobacco

Everyone at Fort Kolmakov enjoyed the 1845 New Year's Day celebration despite the vast, frozen, and isolated Alaskan landscape outside their doors. The event brought local Yup'ik Eskimos and Russians together with Lavrentiy Zagoskin and his party, who were resting from their most recent expedition to explore western Alaska. Zagoskin recorded the end of the year events in his journal. On December 30, one of the men shot a deer and another brought a bladder full of beluga fat to the fort, which provided a small feast for the gathered crowd. New Year's Day witnessed continued merrymaking. Zagoskin wrote, "In the intervals between different native dances and Ukrainian dances I entertained the public by making camphor burn in snow, letting people smell wet tobacco, liquid ammonia, and so on." The Eskimos, who happily celebrated the Russian Orthodox holiday with traditional food and dancing, were impressed when Zagoskin fired several rockets.<sup>1</sup>

While the explorer's journal entry presents a harmless mingling of Russian and Yup'ik social and religious practices, the recorded events foreshadow cultural changes that would drastically transform Yup'ik Eskimo life over the next century. Before arriving on Alaska's shores, the Russians already had a long history of exploiting native ethnic groups in northern Eurasia.<sup>2</sup> The southern Aleuts of Alaska had also suffered brutal treatment and enslavement in the early decades of the Russian-American fur trade.<sup>3</sup> Yet, after several exploratory excursions into western Alaska, the trade relationship between the Yup'ik people and the Russians grew generally friendly, although often fraught with complexity. The Yup'ik Eskimos, while happy to receive

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1 L.A. Zagoskin, *Lieutenant Zagoskin's Travels in Russian America, 1842-1844*, ed. Henry N. Michael (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 231.

2 Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 387.

3 Robert B. Weeden, *Alaska: Promises to Keep* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1978), 4.

trade goods from the Russians, also blamed the foreign traders for introducing new diseases to the region, particularly the deadly smallpox. Tensions heightened when missionaries arrived in the region. The shamans faced threats from both new diseases that they could not cure and the missionaries who wanted to take control of the Eskimos' spiritual lives. Despite the loss of some Eskimos to the Russian Orthodox Church, the shamans managed to maintain their influence over the majority of Yup'ik people, who still relied on these healers in times of crisis. While the primary source record is thin, there is enough evidence to conclude that Yup'ik shamans interpreted the new epidemic diseases in such a way that their reputations as healers stayed intact. This feat rested on specific features of Yup'ik culture, namely the Yup'ik practice of shamanism and the Eskimos' conceptions of disease causes and cures.

### **Early European Forays into Yup'ik Territory and the Establishment of the Fur Trade**

The Yup'ik people experienced direct contact with Europeans relatively late compared to other native groups. Captain James Cook led the first European venture into Kuskokwim Bay in 1778.<sup>4</sup> He recorded initial impressions of the twenty-seven native men who cautiously approached the large European sailing vessel in small canoes. Cook wrote that the natives resembled other groups he had encountered along the coast and “appeared to be wholly unacquainted with people like us; they knew not the use of tobacco, nor was any foreign article seen in their possession, unless a knife may be looked upon as such.”<sup>5</sup> The navigational hazards for ships in the Bering Strait region of western Alaska, the short sailing season, and the distance from Europe all prevented earlier European contact with western Alaska.<sup>6</sup> Although difficulties in

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4 Wendell Oswalt, *Bashful No Longer: An Alaskan Eskimo Ethnohistory, 1778-1988* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 5.

5 James Cook, *Captain Cook's Voyages of Discovery*, ed. Ernest Rhys (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., 1920), 366.

6 Oswalt, 5.



access would limit the extent and intensity of Russian exploration in the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta for a while, the promise of furs and riches would eventually draw traders and explorers to the isolated region.

The Russian desire to develop a fur trade in Alaska provided the impetus for the first sustained contact with Alaska's natives. By the seventeenth century, the Russians were expanding eastward across Asia in search of natural resources and furs.<sup>7</sup> Under orders from Tsar Peter the Great, Vitus Bering commanded a Russian ship that sailed along the eastern coast of Siberia in 1728. He did not see the American continent but did identify a separation of land between Russia and North America, and reported the existence of Saint Lawrence Island.<sup>8</sup> A Russian Imperial Navy ship, under Aleksei Chirikov's command, reached Alaska's shores in 1741.<sup>9</sup> The ship's logbook for July 15 provides a brief and unemotional description: "At two in the morning we distinguished some very high mountains... an hour later the land stood out much better and we could make out trees."<sup>10</sup> When the expedition returned to Russia, they confirmed that the land across the ocean was part of America, and more importantly, that there was an abundance of marine animals on the foreign shores, especially fur seals and sea otters. Entrepreneurs rushed across the ocean to capitalize on the extension of the lucrative fur trade.<sup>11</sup> Russian fur traders first concentrated on exploiting the Aleutian Islands but moved steadily west and north as they decimated fur-bearing animal populations. While the early traders acted alone or in small groups, in 1781 several Russian merchants organized the Shelikhov Company and established a colony

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7 John R. Bockstoce, *Furs and Frontiers in the Far North* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 71.

8 James W. VanStone, introduction to "V.S. Kromchenko's Coastal Explorations in western Alaska, 1822," *Fieldiana: Anthropology*, 64, by V.S. Kromchenko, ed. James W. VanStone, trans. David H. Kraus (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1973), 4.

9 Bockstoce, 75.

10 F.A. Golder, "Journal of Chirikov's Vessel the 'St. Paul,'" in *Bering's Voyages: An Account of the Efforts of the Russians to Determine the Relations of Asia and America*, ed. W.L.G. Joerg (Greenwich, CT: Conde Nast Press, 1922), 291.

11 Lydia T. Black, *Russians in Alaska: 1732-1867* (Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 59.

on Kodiak Island a few years later.<sup>12</sup>

Between 1787 and 1791 a major competitor, the Lebedev-Lastochkin Company, built outposts on southwestern Alaska's Cook Inlet. The competition between companies prompted the first exploration to the north. In the early 1790s, Vasily Ivanov led an expeditionary party of several traders and local natives to explore Alaska's interior. The Russians had heard stories about the rich Kuskokwim and Yukon valleys, but had scant knowledge of the region. No journal survives from Ivanov's journeys, but Russian scholars believe that he was the first European to stand at the Kuskokwim River. Ivanov reported seeing many animals and large native settlements, which he later described to Russian historian V.N. Berkh.<sup>13</sup>

Under the leadership of Aleksandr Baranov, the Shelikhov Company soon dominated and consolidated the Alaskan fur trade and formed the Russian-American Company upon receiving an imperial charter in 1799.<sup>14</sup> The charter required the company to procure furs, establish settlements in Alaska, and prevent foreign competitors from interfering in the northern hunting grounds.<sup>15</sup> The company located its first permanent settlement, called Novo-Arkhangel'sk, in southeastern Alaska.<sup>16</sup> The overall population of foreigners in Alaska remained low throughout the years of Russian rule. In 1799 there were only about 225 Russian traders in Alaska.<sup>17</sup> By the early nineteenth century, the Russian-American Company needed to expand its territory because fur-bearing animal populations were declining in the traditional hunting grounds. The company knew virtually nothing about Alaska to the north, although Baranov may have been aware of

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12 James W. VanStone, introduction to *Russian Exploration in Southwest Alaska: The Travel Journals of Petr Korsakovskiy (1818) and Ivan Ya. Vasilev (1829)*, by Petr Korsakovskiy and Ivan Ya. Vasilev, ed. James W. VanStone, trans. David H. Kraus (Fairbanks, AK: The University of Alaska Press, 1988), 5.

13 Ibid., 6.

14 Bockstoce, 118.

15 James R. Gibson, *Imperial Russia in Frontier Alaska* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1976), 10.

16 Black, 155.

17 Gibson, 7.

Ivanov's earlier expedition for the rival fur company. The Russians were also concerned with maintaining their economic dominance in Alaska, since British and American ships were beginning to explore northern waters. Petr Korsakovskiy, a Company employee, assessed the potential for expanding the fur trade to the north in his travels in 1818 and 1819. The first year, he led an expedition from the Alaska Peninsula as far north as the Kuskokwim River.<sup>18</sup>

In their early interactions with the Yup'ik Eskimos, the Russian goals were to collect information about the natives and establish peaceful relations with local tribes. Korsakovskiy's journals provide important early descriptions of Kuskokwim River Eskimos.<sup>19</sup> He also describes trade-oriented interactions between the Russians and natives. Several Yup'ik Eskimos, upon seeing the expedition members walking along the shore south of the Kuskokwim Bay, ran away in fright. According to Korsakovskiy, one of the Aleut natives in the Russian party, Alinak, “determined to go and tell the truth, that the Russians came to become acquainted with them and to enter into friendly and peaceful negotiations.” Alinak coaxed a few people to return to the area and then the Russians “gave them seed beads, large beads, small knives, ulus [knives], thimbles, small rings, needles and Chinese pearls.”<sup>20</sup>

A later entry from further north also serves to support the friendly intent of the Russian explorers. After the party set up camp near the Kuskokwim River, Korsakovskiy sent an interpreter to bring local leaders to meet with the Russians. When the Eskimos arrived, the Russians gave them gifts of beads, copper, needles, and knives. Korsakovskiy records the supposed words of the Eskimo leader in his journal entry for July 14: “We have long wished that there should be peace and harmony between us. We would be happy to conclude a true union of

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18 VanStone, introduction to *Russian Exploration in Southwest Alaska*, 7.

19 Ibid., 12.

20 Petr Korsakovskiy and Ivan Ya. Vasilev, *Russian Exploration in Southwest Alaska: The Travel Journals of Petr Korsakovskiy (1818) and Ivan Ya. Vasilev (1829)*, ed. James W. VanStone, trans. David H. Kraus (Fairbanks, AK: The University of Alaska Press, 1988), 39.

love between us as we now see that the Russians are good people, quiet and peaceful.” The foreigners fired muskets into the air and then the Eskimos danced and sang for several hours. The next day the Russians made a cross of driftwood and carved an inscription onto a board nailed on the cross: “The overland expedition of the Russian-American Company under the protection of His Imperial Majesty was here from 10 to 15 July, 1818. Held negotiations, after which we set out for the Aglegmiut settlement.” The Russians pounded the cross into the ground and gave the Eskimos a few more goods. Korsakovskiy noted in his journal that the Yup’ik people already possessed glass beads, knives, spears, bows and arrows, which they probably obtained from the Siberian trade network, or from traveling south to trade with the Russians.<sup>21</sup>

Unfortunately, no journal survives from the second Korsakovskiy expedition to the north. During that voyage the party met Eskimos on the Kuskokwim who cautioned them against trying to travel upriver because food supplies would be short. One important result of Korsakovskiy's 1819 expedition was the establishment of a Russian outpost at Aleksandrovskiy Redoubt on the Nushagak River, just south of the Kuskokwim River. Korsakovskiy also reported to the Russian-American Company that interior Alaska had many fur-bearing animals, that the natives were friendly and would be receptive to trading, and that the navigable rivers would provide easy access to the interior.<sup>22</sup>

After Korsakovskiy's promising reports, the Russian-American Company called for further exploration in western Alaska. In 1819 and 1820 Captains M.N. Vasilev and G.S. Shishmarev led coastal explorations on behalf of the Imperial Russian Navy. In the next two years V.S. Kromchenko and A.K. Etolin, both of the Russian-American Company, surveyed the Alaskan coast as well. These expeditions provided the first detailed information about coastal

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 44, 45, 47.

<sup>22</sup> VanStone, introduction to *Russian Exploration in Southwest Alaska*, 8, 13.

geography. Ivan Vasilev followed the coastal explorations with two trips to interior Alaska. The first was an exploration of the Nushagak, Wood, and Togiak Rivers. The second trip in 1830 took him further north to the Kuskokwim.<sup>23</sup>

In March, 1829, Russian-American Company general manager P.E. Chistyakov provided Vasilev with written instructions for his second expedition, which detailed Russian motives in the northern region. Vasilev was to gather geographical information about the Nushagak, Kuskokwim, and Yukon Rivers, and collect data on native populations, fur-bearing animal populations and locations, and potential settlement spots. A passage from Chistyakov's document provides insight into Russian attitudes towards the Eskimos. "The success of your expedition depends on good relations with the savages... on the one hand treat them like children-with care and affection, but on the other as savages- very cautiously."<sup>24</sup> The Russians knew that good relations with the Eskimos would be vital for extending the fur trade in western Alaska. Vasilev accomplished the goals put forward by Chistyakov. He drew accurate maps of his travels, which contributed much to the geographic knowledge of interior Alaska. Vasilev also recorded river depths, currents, and detailed information on plant and animal life in the region, which helped the Russian-American company choose locations for new trading posts.<sup>25</sup>

While the goals of early northern expeditions helped the Russians initiate good relations with the indigenous populations, the successful penetration of the Yup'ik region can also be contributed to certain geographic characteristics of Yup'ik life. Home villages allowed Russians to deal with concentrated and stable settlements. Because the villages were small and scattered, there was little chance of defense against outsiders. Resistance was also less likely because there

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23 Ibid., 8, 9.

24 P.E. Chistyakov, "The Northern Overland Expedition Instructions Given to Mr. I. Ya. Vasilev by the General Manager P.E. Chistyakov, March, 1829," in *Russian Exploration in Southwest Alaska*, 77-87 (see note 12), 77, 84.

25 VanStone, introduction to *Russian Exploration in Southwest Alaska*, 13.

was no central village political organization and no inter-village alliances. Trade networks, both near and far, were already well established. Eskimos enjoyed the trade goods that they had access to, which implied that they would be receptive to engaging in trade with the Russians.<sup>26</sup>

Anthropologist Lydia Black argues that Russia was unique among colonial empires that settled the American continent because they were not primarily concerned with establishing permanent settlements on American soil.<sup>27</sup> Since few Russian traders actually made their homes in Alaska, they had little motivation to forcefully change the existing lifestyles of the Eskimos. The arduous overland journeys required to reach the western coast and interior prevented the foreigners from establishing cultural or physical dominance in the region. Both the Eskimos and the Russians saw potential gains in developing a trade-based relationship.

After establishing that the Yukon-Kuskokwim region held great potential as a profitable extension of the existing fur trade, the Russians built Aleksandrovskiy Redoubt in 1818 on the banks of the Nushagak River near the coast; a location that would facilitate further exploration to the north and encourage trade with the local people. The Russian-American Company then built St. Michael on the northern edge of Yup'ik territory in 1833, an outpost at the Eskimo village of Ikogmiut in 1835, and finally, Fort Kolmakov along the Kuskokwim River in 1841.<sup>28</sup> The Russians conducted two forms of trade. First, natives would come from across the region to the trading posts and barter their furs for goods. Besides the major posts already identified, the Russians built smaller trading stations, often run by native managers, in numerous villages. The Russians would also regularly send out expeditions to native trading rendezvous, often engaging native middlemen to conduct the bartering process. Every summer the Russian-American Company ship arrived at St. Michael to resupply the fort, which drew Yup'ik, Inupiat, and

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26 Oswalt, 39.

27 Black, 209.

28 Oswalt, 44, 50, 57.

Athabaskan traders from across western Alaska.<sup>29</sup>

The Russians were generally fair when dealing with Eskimos who lived near the trading posts because their fur-trading goals in the region relied on amicable relations. The Russian Imperial Charter of 1799, under which the Russian-American Company operated until the sale of Alaska in 1867, laid out a series of rules to govern interactions with the natives. Company representatives had to obtain permission from the locals before establishing an outpost, respect the independence of natives, and could not exact tribute or taxes from the locals. The Russian imperial government did not send agents to each trading post to enforce the charter, but relied on the chief manager of the colony to ensure compliance.<sup>30</sup> This hands-off policy prevented foreign political structures from influencing the Yup'ik way of life, although the Russians did occasionally involve themselves in local politics. They settled feuds between villages and appointed influential locals as company representatives to keep the peace and motivate villagers to bring pelts to the company.<sup>31</sup>

While there were laws to govern Russian action in the region, in reality the isolation of the trading posts in western Alaska probably had a greater influence on the foreigners' behavior. Positive relations with locals meant that the Russians could trade for food and basic necessities that could not be sent overland from other distant company posts. Also, if the natives attacked a Russian fort, help would probably never arrive. Due to the geographic isolation, creating alliances with the Eskimos was essential for the Russians' physical survival. When smallpox arrived in the region in the late 1830s, these alliances between Russian traders and Eskimos would be tested but not broken.

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29 Lydia T. Black, "The Yup'ik of Western Alaska and Russian Impact," *Études inuit. Inuit Studies* 8, no. 3 (1984): 31.

30 Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 257, 258.

31 Oswalt, 54.

### **Smallpox: “An abrupt and violent death”<sup>32</sup>**

The Yup'ik people were introduced to European epidemic disease in the form of the deadly and disfiguring smallpox virus, which killed off perhaps half of the indigenous population as it spread across southern Alaska and the Northwest coast between 1835 and 1840.<sup>33</sup> The *Variola major* virus, which causes smallpox, was usually transmitted through face-to-face contact when a person inhaled the small infectious droplets. Smallpox scabs and dried-out bodily secretions may also carry the infection. Smallpox could be transmitted only between humans; there are no animal carriers.<sup>34</sup> After the virus entered a person's respiratory tract, the period of incubation was approximately eight to ten days before symptoms appeared. After the onset of fever and general malaise, small red lesions spread across the victim's skin. The lesions quickly turned into pus-filled blisters that eventually erupted and separated from the skin layers underneath, which caused excruciating pain.<sup>35</sup> Death usually followed within ten days of the appearance of the smallpox rash. Survivors carried both deep scars and immunity to the disease.<sup>36</sup>

Smallpox has shared a long history with people, probably first emerging as humans settled down and began keeping livestock. There is historical evidence that smallpox circulated among Europeans and Africans for centuries before being exported to the New World. By the time smallpox reached the Yup'ik people, the disease already had a well-established reputation for killing large numbers of Native Americans. In 1518, the first smallpox pandemic broke out in the Caribbean and soon spread to the American mainland. In the centuries that followed,

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32 Ivan Petroff, *Report on the Population, Industries, and Resources of Alaska*, Department of the Interior, Census Office (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1881), 83.

33 Ibid.

34 Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 3, 15, 6.

35 Noble David Cook, *Born to Die: Disease and New World Conquest, 1492-1650* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 67.

36 Don Dumond, “Poison in the Cup: The South Alaskan Smallpox Epidemic of 1835” in *Chin Hills to Chiloquin: Papers Honoring the Versatile Career of Theodore Stern*, ed. Don. E. Dumond, 117-130, University of Oregon Anthropological Papers, no. 52 (1996): 118-119.



smallpox became a recurring disease that visited generation after generation of indigenous Americans and contributed to the rapid depopulation of the western hemisphere.<sup>37</sup>

The Russian-American Company leaders knew what a smallpox epidemic could do to their well-established fur trade in Alaska and acted to vaccinate the natives even before the smallpox epidemic hit in 1835. The Russians witnessed the devastating impact of various diseases on native Alaskans as epidemics of whooping cough, influenza, measles, and possibly smallpox, broke out in Russian America territory in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, likely transmitted by European ships that stopped in at native villages along the southern coast. However, the outbreaks were generally confined to specific areas, such as the Aleutian Islands.<sup>38</sup> The Russians brought smallpox vaccines to Alaska in 1808 and an Orthodox priest dispatched to Alaska in 1816 underwent training in vaccination administration.<sup>39</sup> In 1822 another shipment of vaccine arrived in Novo-Arkhangel'sk (modern-day Sitka) and Russian agents vaccinated many native employees of the Russian-American Company.<sup>40</sup> Natives were also vaccinated in southern Alaska and throughout the Aleutian Islands.<sup>41</sup> However, the vaccination program was limited. There was not enough vaccine, no adequate preservation method, and there were too few medical personnel to distribute the vaccine across the entire region of Alaska.<sup>42</sup> Any vaccines that reached Alaska had to be shipped either halfway around the world by boat or hauled across the vast expanse of Siberia, which made Russia's vaccination program expensive and slow. Despite the challenges, the Russian traders vaccinated approximately 500 Indians, Creoles, and Aleuts around Novo-

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37 Alfred W. Crosby, "Smallpox," in *The Cambridge World History of Human Disease*, ed. Kenneth F. Kiple, 1008-1013 (Cambridge, England: University of Cambridge Press, 1993), 1009-1010.

38 James R. Gibson, "Smallpox on the Northwest Coast, 1835-1838," *BC Studies*, 56 (Winter 1982-83): 62-3.

39 Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 196.

40 Dumond, 123.

41 P.A. Tikhmenev, *A History of the Russian-American Company*, trans. and ed. Richard A. Pierce and Alton S. Donnelly (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1978), 198.

42 Gibson, "Smallpox," 75.

Arkhangel'sk by the late 1820s, which provided this group with protection when smallpox arrived in 1835.<sup>43</sup>

The first victim of smallpox, a young Creole boy living at the Russian-American Company's headquarters in Novo-Arkhangel'sk, showed symptoms in December, 1835.<sup>44</sup> Historians still debate the question of how smallpox arrived in the region. The epidemic may have spread up the coast, or a visiting ship could have carried the disease to the Russian capital.<sup>45</sup> However, the most intriguing argument is put forth by anthropologist Don Dumond, who contends that a batch of vaccines that reached Novo-Arkhangel'sk in November, 1835 may have been contaminated with the *Variola* virus, a devastating mistake that could have actually caused an outbreak of smallpox among those accepting the tainted vaccine.<sup>46</sup>

The Russian Orthodox missionary priest Ioann Veniaminov witnessed the outbreak of smallpox in the Russian capital. Few Russians became ill but local Aleut and Tlingit Indians were quickly knocked down by the disease. In an April, 1836, letter, Veniaminov wrote, "In a period of two months this terrible visitor killed 300 Koloshi [Tlingit] of those living near the fort. A terrible number! The pox has not even abandoned them at the present time...They died by the dozens and then by the hundreds." Veniaminov noted that the native people turned to their shamans for help, but the shamans were also dying from the epidemic, so many came to the Russians for vaccination. He happily reported that numerous Tlingits began adopting Christianity in the aftermath of the epidemic. Other native groups did not acquiesce to Russian vaccination efforts.

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43 Creole was a commonly-used term in Russian America to describe a child whose father was Russian and mother was native. The term had a different use in other Euroamerican colonies, where it commonly designated a child of European parentage born in the Americas. Robert Fortune, *Chills and Fever: Health and Disease in the Early History of Alaska* (Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 1992), 229.

44 Innokentii Veniaminov, "The Condition of the Orthodox Church in Russian America," trans. and ed. Robert Nichols and Robert Croskey, *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (1972): 47.

45 Gibson, "Smallpox," 67; see also Tikhmenev, 198.

46 Dumond, 124-125.

The Kodiak natives ran away from Russian doctors and Veniaminov estimates that about one-third of them died.<sup>47</sup>

Despite the Russians' immunizations efforts, the deadly disease spread to other Tlingit villages by the summer of 1836. Smallpox also spread westward along the southern coast of Alaska and reached far down onto the Alaska Peninsula by summer 1838.<sup>48</sup> The Yukon-Kuskokwim region first faced exposure in the spring of 1838. A party of Russian-American Company employees, on their way from Kodiak to St. Michael, took along a batch of vaccines that they distributed among willing natives and Company employees at Aleksandrovskiy Redoubt in late February, 1838. Within eight or nine days of the vaccinations, smallpox broke out in the Nushagak region and spread rapidly between villages. The party arrived at St. Michael on May 3, 1838, and in the same day the first native resident came down with smallpox.<sup>49</sup> The manager at Fort Kolmakov reported that few Eskimos would accept vaccination.<sup>50</sup>

The devastation wrought by the epidemic cannot be overstated. Zagoskin, who traveled through the Yukon-Kuskokwim region within a few years of the smallpox epidemic, is the best source for understanding the impact of the disease on Yup'ik people. Fortunately for scholars, Zagoskin was a careful observer of the world around him. Born in 1808 to a moderately wealthy family, Zagoskin completed education in a private boarding school and then joined the Kronshtadt Navel Cadet Corps. He went on to serve twenty-six years in the Russian Navy. Zagoskin demonstrated a life-long interest in literature, history, science and zoology. As a naval officer in the Caspian region, Zagoskin read of great Russian explorers such as Lisianskiy and

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47 Veniaminov, 47, 49.

48 Fortune, 232-233.

49 Dumond, 125.

50 Lydia T. Black, "Data on Persons Closely Associated with Netsvetov and the Kvikhpak Mission," in *The Journals of Iakov Netsvetov: The Yukon Years, 1845-1863*, by Iakov Netsvetov, trans. Lydia T. Black, ed. Richard A. Pierce (Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press, 1984), 470.

Kotzebue, who adventured in Oceania and Alaska, which may have motivated him to ask for a transfer to the Russian-American Company.<sup>51</sup>

During his two years in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region, Zagoskin noticed obvious depopulation as a result of the smallpox epidemic. While sailing along the coast near Fort St. Michael, he described the narrow, sandy beaches tucked into the craggy, rocky shoreline. “At such places you can see the ruins of native summer camps: Mkhat, Chyuplyugpak, Kygali, and Kebyakhlyuk,” he wrote. “All these places have been abandoned since the dispersion or death of the natives at the time of a smallpox epidemic in 1838.” Zagoskin describes how often survivors of the epidemic would relocate their now smaller villages to nearby sites, sometimes across the river. As he traveled through western Alaska, Zagoskin took careful population surveys in order to compare numbers to the estimates made by earlier Russian explorers. He asked, “What became of the people? The natives say they died of smallpox and this story is confirmed by the old-timers at the fort [St. Michael].” Zagoskin estimated that the epidemic carried off from one-sixth to one-half of the populations in various villages.<sup>52</sup>

The actual number of deaths from the 1838 smallpox epidemic remains unknown. Based on archived Russian-American Company records, scholars estimate that approximately half to two-thirds of the Eskimos in western Alaska perished during the epidemic.<sup>53</sup> Vasilev, who explored the Yukon-Kuskokwim region in 1829, provided a population estimate of almost 8,000 natives between the Nushagak and Kuskokwim Rivers, but there is no way to prove the accuracy of his count. Zagoskin doubted Vasilev's numbers. He argued that the earlier explorer must have exaggerated the population of the region because Zagoskin encountered a fraction of Vasilev's

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51 M.B. Chernanko, “Lavrentiy Alekseyevich Zagoskin: An Account of his Life and Works,” in *Lieutenant Zagoskin's Travels in Russian America, 1842-1844*, by L.A. Zagoskin, ed. Henry N. Michael, 3-34 (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 11, 13, 14.

52 Zagoskin, 92, 95, 204, 281.

53 Oswalt, 51.

postulated population.<sup>54</sup> However, if two-thirds of the natives in the area were already dead from smallpox, then both Zagoskin and Vasilev may have been fairly accurate in their estimates.

The likelihood that smallpox killed high numbers of Yup'ik people is also supported by the experience of other tribes who encountered the disease across the Americas in the centuries after European contact. Smallpox was probably the deadliest disease introduced by Europeans, killing more Native Americans in the early contact period than any other disease or conflict.<sup>55</sup> Native Americans as a population were highly susceptible to smallpox because they had no previous exposure to the disease and therefore no immunity. Historian Alfred W. Crosby labels diseases like smallpox “virgin soil epidemics.” Crosby identifies two general categories to explain the extensive impact of virgin soil epidemics on Native Americans. The first involves the nature of the disease. Virgin soil epidemics tended to impact all age groups, including large percentages of people aged 15 to 40, who were usually primarily responsible for the economic, defensive, and reproductive tasks in a community. In addition, epidemics might arrive in a region simultaneously or successively, which often increased mortality rates. Crosby's second category of factors involved the ways that Native people reacted to epidemics. He contends that many people relied on traditional medicines, which provided little relief and sometimes even hurt recovery, while also contributing to higher mortality rates.<sup>56</sup> Certain features of Eskimo life probably encouraged smallpox to spread. The Yup'ik people often fled the home where someone died, which likely spread infectious diseases to new areas.<sup>57</sup> While the outside Arctic air is generally dry and cold, which inhibits disease organisms, the interiors of traditional dwellings

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54 Zagoskin, 308.

55 Kristine B. Patterson and Thomas Runge, “Smallpox and the Native American,” *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* 323, no. 4 (2002): 216.

56 Alfred W. Crosby, “Virgin Soil Epidemics as a Factor in the Aboriginal Depopulation in America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (1976): 289, 293-295, 296-297.

57 James W. VanStone, *Tikchik Village: A Nineteenth Century Riverine Community in western Alaska* 56, no. 3 *Fieldiana: Anthropology* (Chicago, IL: Field Museum Press, 1968): 230, 262.

were relatively warm and moist. Close proximity of family members within these buildings assisted diseases in spreading from person to person.<sup>58</sup>

While no published journals are available from any Russians who actually witnessed the smallpox epidemic in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region, Zagoskin referenced the experiences of Vasiliy Malakhov, a scout for the Russian-American Company who traveled up the Yukon River during the waning days of the smallpox epidemic. According to Zagoskin, Malakhov left Fort St. Michael with instructions to settle a new fur-trading post near the native village of Nulato, inland on the Yukon River. In March, 1839 Malakhov reached Nulato and met an old man, Unillu, who had just buried his two wives and three sons. Unillu, realizing that he would also be consumed by smallpox, set fire to the village *qasgiq* and two houses. In a third house he lit a fire and suffocated to death. Other survivors scattered. Only a handful of Russians remained at the site to build the company outpost. As spring came “the starving dogs ate the bodies of their dead masters.”<sup>59</sup>

The survivors of this first epidemic were able to regroup, despite the terrible losses in their population, which was not unusual among indigenous groups faced with single epidemics of infectious disease. Usually the indirect effects of epidemic diseases on native groups, including social and economic disruptions and decreased fertility, contributed more to population decline.<sup>60</sup> However, there is no data to indicate that the Yup'ik people experienced long-term population decline from this first epidemic. The reasons likely lie in Yup'ik subsistence practices and social structure. The Yup'ik people, suffering from a severe decline in productivity during the crucial

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58 Donald J. Ortner and Mary Lucas Powell, “Paleopathology,” in *Environment, Origins, and Population*, vol. 3, *Handbook of North American Indians*, ed. Douglas H. Ubelaker (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institute, 2006), 661.

59 Zagoskin, 146-147.

60 Russell A. Thorton, “Aboriginal North American Population and Rates of Decline, ca. a.d. 1500-1900,” *Current Anthropology* 38, no. 2 (1997): 311.

spring and summer months while people lay sick and dying from smallpox, still regularly relied on fishing in the fall and winter, which would have carried the population through a period that otherwise might have been one of starvation. Famine regularly visited the Yup'ik people, so their social system was well-adapted to handle crisis situations. As a semi-mobile population already accustomed to seasonal moves, survivors could travel to other villages that were part of their particular regional confederations and seek food, shelter, and comfort.<sup>61</sup>

The Russians who lived in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region surely viewed the epidemic as a serious setback in their efforts to continue peaceful trade relations with the Eskimos. Zagoskin also provides some insight into Russian views towards the epidemic by writing, “The infliction sent them by Providence was great, but the blessing that resulted was likewise great, as all those who are left are Christians.”<sup>62</sup> However, Zagoskin's words are obviously inaccurate. The Yup'ik people generally viewed the Russians with suspicion and distrust after the smallpox epidemic, while also continuing to access economic opportunities available through the trading partnership. The Yup'ik reaction to the smallpox epidemic, guided by the shamans, played a crucial role in shaping relations between the natives and Russians over the next few decades.

### **Post-epidemic tensions and trade**

As the people re-grouped they had to explain what caused the disease that tore apart their world. The Yup'ik Eskimos blamed the Russians for bringing the devastating illness to their region. Always quick to point out friendly interactions with local residents, throughout his journal Zagoskin also demonstrated a wariness of the native people. When planning a journey to Kotzebue Sound, Zagoskin questioned the wisdom of striking out with only the four men

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61 Ann Fienup-Riordan, *When Our Bad Season Comes: A Cultural Account of Subsistence Harvesting and Harvest Disruption on the Yukon Delta* (Anchorage: Alaska Anthropological Association, 1986), 40-43.

62 Zagoskin, 100.

currently traveling with him. The plan seemed risky to Zagoskin, since “the terrible effects of the smallpox epidemic, which was supposed to have been introduced by the Russians, were fresh in the memory of everyone.”<sup>63</sup>

While scattered instances of violence occurred in the early years of Russian penetration in the region, the fact that many Yup'ik people blamed the Russians for bringing the devastating epidemic must have influenced post-smallpox violence.<sup>64</sup> Zagoskin described several instances of violence against the Russians in the years following the smallpox epidemic. In 1839, while resting in the village on the Khotol River, a tributary to the Yukon, Deryabin, manager of the Nulato post, and two other Company employees were approached by a group of men who wanted to trade. When Deryabin saw the native men begin to reach for their knives he threw some cartridges into the fire to scare them off. Near the same village in 1842, natives attacked a team carrying Russian-American Company goods to the Nulato post. Zagoskin does not provide details concerning this event. He merely states that “the strength and courage” of the expedition's leader saved the transport.<sup>65</sup> While he does not explain the exact reasons for the attempted murders, we can infer that fear and distrust of the Russians as a result of the devastating epidemic likely played a role.

Eskimos attacked the Russian fort at Ikogmiut in 1839. While Zagoskin lays blame for the attack on the conceit of the Russian traders, other factors were probably involved. The same group of men tried to kill the Creole Semen Lukin, commander of Fort Kolmakov, the following year. According to Zagoskin, Lukin enjoyed a rapport with the Eskimos. Zagoskin observed that “The native is very appreciative of kind treatment... Lukin has always kept open house; we have

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>64</sup> For example, the Russian priest Father Juvenal was probably murdered by Yup'ik people in 1796 while he was traveling overland from the Kenai Peninsula. See Black, “Russian Impact,” 27-28.

<sup>65</sup> Zagoskin, 141-142.



often seen a dozen natives in his little room who will wait silently for days at a time until he returns from his work in the woods or at the fish trap.”<sup>66</sup> William H. Dall, who traveled along the Yukon River in 1866, interviewed Lukin and also noted a favorable impression of the fort commander. He stated that Lukin “adopted a mode of life not dissimilar in some respects to that of the natives, among whom he attained great influence.”<sup>67</sup> The Eskimos who attacked Lukin likely did not do so because the trader was over-confident. Although the natives' motives for attacking Lukin are ultimately unknowable, the Eskimos may have viewed Lukin, the mixed-blood son of a Russian, as party to the introduction of smallpox. There is no evidence that Lukin ever contracted smallpox. A.A. Baranov, first commander of the Russian-American Company, raised Lukin after the murder of his father in 1806.<sup>68</sup> Lukin may have received a smallpox vaccination while living in Novo-Arkhangel'sk, or been vaccinated when the group of Russians came north with vaccines in 1838. If the Eskimos who attacked Lukin were attempting retaliation for the smallpox epidemic, then similar reasons may have motivated the successful attack a year earlier at Ikogmiut.

Where did the Eskimos get the idea that Russians brought them smallpox? The question is intriguing and difficult to answer with certainty. The easy explanation is that since the Russian team bearing vaccinations arrived at the posts of Aleksandrovskiy Redoubt and St. Michael just as smallpox broke out among the native there, and since the few Russians in the region did not get sick themselves, the Yup'ik Eskimos logically concluded that the Russians must have introduced the disease. Native American groups across North America sometimes concluded that Europeans brought diseases to them when epidemics arrived concurrently with foreigners.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 254, 255.

<sup>67</sup> William H. Dall, *Alaska and its Resources* (Boston, MA: Lee and Shepard, 1870; repr., New York: Arno Press Inc., 1970), 275. Citations are to the reprinted edition.

<sup>68</sup> Zagoskin, 334, 341.

Or, although medical knowledge of disease was still limited at this time, the Russians in the region may have had a basic understanding that smallpox could spread as a result of person-to-person contact and so communicated this information to native people, who then spread the news to others. The concept of miasmas, in which vapors could leave dead bodies and make others sick, had long been known in Europe. Also, germ theory first appeared in the mid-sixteenth century, although it was not proven until the 1880s.<sup>69</sup> However, even if the Russians realized they were spreading smallpox to the Eskimos, the traders would have no motive to share speculations that could potentially damage their economic livelihood.

Russian traders and visitors to western Alaska sometimes reported hostility from natives who were losing control over the local trade networks.<sup>70</sup> By spreading rumors about the Russians maybe some Eskimos hoped to discourage people from trading directly with the Russians. Unfortunately, there is not really any evidence to support this hypothesis. However, one primary source references an interesting rumor about the Russians. In his travels near Fort St. Michael, the explorer Andrey Glazunov visited a *qasgiq* to encourage trade with the Russians. The Yup'ik response is quite surprising. "Answering for all, one elder cried aloud, 'Now we will no longer believe reports that the Russians have iron nales and teeth, breathe fire and practise cruelty,'" wrote Glazunov. "Now we have seen a real Russian and we thank you for telling us the truth. We will come to your redoubt and trade with you in peace."<sup>71</sup> Glazunov does not indicate where the Eskimos heard these "reports," but the reference to practicing cruelty may arise from stories of harsh treatments of the Aleuts further south. At this time, the published primary source record is not complete enough to draw any conclusions about the role of trade in shaping Yup'ik

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69 William Hardy McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976): 265, 267.

70 Zagorskin, 136, 150; Tikhmenev, 184.

71 Ferdinand Petrovich Wrangell, *Russian America: Statistical and Ethnographic Information*, trans. Mary Sadouski (Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press, 1980), 75.

associations of the Russians with smallpox.

The true reasons why the Eskimos blamed the Russians are likely complex. Other native groups in southern and western Alaska also condemned the Russians and, since different tribes had different experiences with the Russians, it is unlikely that they all happened to arrive at the same conclusion independent of one another. The Yup'ik Eskimos had particular ideas about disease that indicated a practical understanding of what caused illness, which must have played a role in shaping their reactions to smallpox. The shamans also had a vested interest in explaining the disease that confounded all their traditional cures.

There is evidence that other Alaskan native groups also accused the Russians of importing disease. Father Veniaminov, who witnessed the Tlingit Indians' reaction to the smallpox epidemic, observed that "some baseless shamans even suggested that the pox was loosed upon them by the Russians." He also related rumors that the Tlingit tried to infect the Russians with the disease by putting smallpox scabs into fish that they then sold to the foreign traders.<sup>72</sup> The Koyukuk Indians, neighbors to the Yup'ik on the Yukon River, also blamed the Russians for smallpox. Zagoskin recorded that the residents of Nokkhakat "feared to contract some disease or something similar to smallpox from contact with the Russians, and they decided to purify us by setting fire along the trail at the point where it came out of the woods onto the bank." Zagoskin witnessed similar actions by the Ingalik Indians on the Yukon River. "In many villages we were met with dancing, and when we asked: 'Why is this done?' the answer was that it was a prayer to the great spirit who protects them from the Russians," wrote Zagoskin. "All the tribes of these people believe to this very moment that the smallpox epidemic which raged in this area in 1838 and 1839 was loosed by the Russians."<sup>73</sup> It is interesting to note that different native populations

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<sup>72</sup> Veniaminov, 47.

<sup>73</sup> Zagoskin, 150, 248.

in Alaska demonstrated similarities in their views of the smallpox epidemics. The Yup'ik people were very mobile and traveled far to trade and engage in religious festivals, so they may have encountered Tlingit or Koyukuk or Ingalik or some other native group who argued that the Russians brought the disease upon the people.

However, the Yup'ik people would only accept such a tale if they found it plausible. Their existing belief system must have been compatible to the explanation of a Russian origin for smallpox. Based on available evidence, I conclude that the Yup'ik conceptions of illness cause and cure were able to incorporate new epidemic disease. There were two theories of disease among the Yup'ik Eskimos before white contact: "soul-loss" and "intrusion."<sup>74</sup> The idea of soul-loss refers to the ability of shamans to steal the soul of a person, which causes illness and then death.<sup>75</sup> For the purposes of understanding Yup'ik conceptions of infectious disease, the idea of intrusion is most useful. Anthropologist Margaret Lantis argues that "the concept of an intrusive agent in the patient's body best fits the 'germ theory.'"<sup>76</sup>

The Yup'ik Eskimos believed that disease could result from an intrusion of vapors into the body.<sup>77</sup> Various taboos exemplify the concept of airborne illness. Menstruating women were prohibited from looking at or touching others because their odor, blood, or vapors could contaminate people.<sup>78</sup> "A peculiar atmosphere is supposed to surround" girls who experienced menarche, according to Edward William Nelson, "and if a young man should come near enough for it to touch him it would render him visible to every animal he might hunt..."<sup>79</sup> The Eskimos

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74 Margaret Lantis, "Folk Medicine and Hygiene Lower Kuskokwim and Nunivak-Nelson Island Areas," *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska* 8, no. 1 (1959): 4.

75 Edward William Nelson, "The Eskimo About Bering Strait," in *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington D.C.: Washington Government Printing Office, 1899), 422.

76 Lantis, 4.

77 Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries and Passages: Rule and Ritual in Yup'ik Eskimo Oral Tradition* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 191.

78 Phyllis Morrow, "A Woman's Vapor: Yupik Bodily Powers in Southwest Alaska," *Ethnology* 41, no. 4 (2002): 339.

79 Nelson, 291.

would often fumigate a sick person and his house to remove bad vapors.<sup>80</sup> People believed that spending too much time sleeping would allow bad air to intrude into the body, so they strongly encouraged an active lifestyle. Rubbing dirt on the skin could act as a barrier to sicknesses entering the body. Fienup-Riordan observed Nelson Islanders wiping their food bowls clean after use and turning them upside down to prevent contamination.<sup>81</sup> Zagoskin noticed that the Eskimos had a great fear of infection. He wrote, “It happens sometimes that a person who is hopelessly ill is dressed while still alive in his best clothes and is carried to an empty summer hut where he must die of hunger.”<sup>82</sup> While the specific causes of illness, “bad vapors,” were inaccurate according to current medical knowledge, the Yup'ik principles of action to avoid contagion were practical and demonstrate a basic understanding of disease. The fact that people could cause disease in others fits well with an interpretation that the Russians were capable of introducing smallpox.

An especially intriguing aspect of Yup'ik conceptions of disease comes from their belief that epidemics could descend from the moon during an eclipse. Sometimes a disease could also fall from the sun. Nelson reported that “among the inhabitants along the lower Yukon it is believed that a subtle essence or unclean influence descends to the earth during an eclipse, and if any of it is caught in utensils of any kind it will produce sickness. As a result, immediately on the commencement of an eclipse, every woman turns bottom side up all her pots, wooden buckets, and dishes.” An eclipse of the sun or moon could also indicate the coming of war. When the people witnessed an eclipse the shaman was tasked with appeasing the spirit living in the moon in order to save the people.<sup>83</sup>

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80 Lantis, 38.

81 Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries and Passages*, 192-3.

82 Zagoskin, 105.

83 Nelson, 431.

Nelson recorded a traditional story in St. Michael that explains the causes of epidemic disease. A family once lived in a coastal village. Their son fell in love with his sister and she “floated away into the sky and became the moon” to avoid her pestering brother. The boy became the sun and has followed his sister the sun ever since. Sometimes he overtakes and embraces her which causes an eclipse. After his children left the father became angry and lost his love for humankind. He went across the earth scattering diseases, killing people, and eating their bodies. Eventually the shamans joined together and used their magic to capture him. Although he was bound hand and foot he could still introduce disease. To prevent evil spirits from taking possession of dead bodies the Yup'ik people began to bind their deceased relatives before burial, just as the evil one had been bound by the shamans.<sup>84</sup>

Moravian missionaries, who arrived in western Alaska in the late nineteenth century, also noted that the Yup'ik people equated disease with eclipses. Carrie A. Detterer, a Moravian missionary in Bethel, noted that during an eclipse the natives “think that the moon dies, and if any one sleeps when there is an eclipse he will also die immediately.”<sup>85</sup> Detterer credited fellow missionary John Kilbuck with providing her that information, which he probably learned on a trip to Togiak in 1889. While resting in the tent one evening, Kilbuck recorded in his journal that “the native woman happened to look out, and became very talkative to the rest, about the moon. I could not understand them at first, but finally made me to understand that the moon was dead, meaning an eclipse. This, to the natives, is a sign of death.”<sup>86</sup> On the night that Kilbuck recorded

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84 Ibid., 481.

85 Carrie A. Detterer, “Extracts from Sister Carrie A. Detterer's Journal,” in *Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen* (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Publication Office, 1889), 66.

86 John Kilbuck, *The Yup'ik Eskimos: As Described in the Travel Journals and Ethnographic Accounts of John and Edith Kilbuck who served with the Alaska Mission of the Moravian Church, 1886-1900*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan (Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press, 1988), 146.

the entry, January 17, 1889, there was a partial eclipse of the moon visible across Alaska.<sup>87</sup>

People in western Alaska would have also witnessed a partial solar eclipse on May 4, 1837, just as the smallpox epidemic was spreading across southern Alaska.<sup>88</sup> Interestingly, the Yup'ik people experienced a terrible and widespread epidemic of influenza in the summer of 1900 and a total solar eclipse was visible in western Alaska on May 28, 1900.<sup>89</sup> The association between epidemics and eclipses may have roots in the coincidences of these events occurring near to each other. The shamans would have been responsible for explaining this connection.

As those responsible for the mental, physical and spiritual health of the people, the shamans would have guided the Yup'ik Eskimos in understanding the new epidemic within the context of their belief system. For the shamans, a crucial part of interpreting smallpox must have involved explaining why they could not cure the terrible disease. Besides the belief that people could cause disease in others with vapors, there are certain features of shamanism that could have helped the shamans craft explanations. Shamans mediated between the world of spirits and the physical world. They could only complete requests to cure illness, predict the future, or assist in hunting if specific helper spirits promised to give the shamans their support. Without willing helper spirits, a shaman was powerless, and would have to explain to the people that he or she could not solve the problem.<sup>90</sup> The shamans, unable to help those suffering from smallpox, and likely falling ill themselves, may have blamed the helper spirits for ignoring the Eskimos' pleas for help. They could have also accused the people of not following the prescribed taboos, which

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87 *Eclipses Online*, HM Nautical Almanac Office, <http://www.eclipse.org.uk/eclipse/1421889/> (accessed March, 6, 2011).

88 *Eclipses Online*, HM Nautical Almanac Office, <http://www.eclipse.org.uk/eclipse/0321837/> (accessed March, 6, 2011).

89 *Eclipses Online*, HM Nautical Almanac Office, <http://www.eclipse.org.uk/eclipse/0111900/index.html> (accessed March, 6, 2011).

90 Jean-Loup Rousselot, "Yupik Shamanism," in *Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices, and Culture*, vol. 1, ed. Mariko Namba Walter and Eva Jane Neumann Fridman (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2004), 362.

kept the helper spirits away.

Another possibility that fits well with the Yup'ik world view is that the Eskimos viewed the Russians as powerful shamans capable of unleashing disease upon them, which was a common shamanistic skill. Indigenous groups across the Americas framed their early interactions with Europeans in supernatural terms. For example, Spanish explorers such as Jacques Cartier and Hernando de Soto described Native Americans who asked them to heal their sick, which indicates that the natives viewed the Spaniards as powerful shamans.<sup>91</sup> J.A.H. Hartmann, who explored the potential for establishing a mission in western Alaska in 1884, wrote that Yup'ik shamans could kill other Eskimos but not white men.<sup>92</sup> Zagoskin also found that some shamans claimed to be in contact with the spirit of the Russians when they came to settle St. Michael, and so these shamans were greatly esteemed by other Eskimos.<sup>93</sup> The Yup'ik shamans may have felt unable to overcome these powerful Russian rivals, especially since they brought hitherto unknown illnesses. Also, by the mid-to-late 1830s, many Yup'ik people had probably not yet encountered an actual Russian person, despite the various expeditions from the south. The lack of knowledge about the Russians could have contributed to imaginings of them as extremely dangerous shamans. Certainly the Eskimos who met Glazunov and described the foreigners as fire-breathing with iron nails and teeth had formed an opinion on the characteristics of Russians before meeting any in person.

Zagoskin recorded an interesting story about shamans and epidemic disease. While in a village *qasgiq* he watched a song and dance that depicted a shaman going from his hunting camp to his winter house. The shaman's dog suddenly stopped, whimpered and became frightened. The

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91 Bruce Trigger, "Early Native North American Responses to European Contact: Romantic versus Rationalistic Interpretations," *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 4 (1991): 1202.

92 J.A.H. Hartmann, "Diary of an Exploratory Journey to Alaska," in *Periodical Accounts Relating to the Missions of the Church of the United Brethren*, Vol. 33 (London: Brethren Society, 1884): 256.

93 Zagoskin, 120.



shaman could not understand what was wrong until he looked up and saw a spirit. Zagoskin described the interaction between the shaman and spirit like this: “‘What is the matter?’ asks the shaman. ‘Go no farther,’ answers the spirit, ‘there is a disease raging in your village. The people are dying sudden death.’ ‘If I am to die of this disease,’ says the shaman, ‘then I shall die, wherever I am, but in my village are my wife and children and the ashes of my ancestors.’”<sup>94</sup> This tale demonstrates the shaman's bravery in the face of a foe that might be extremely powerful and lends support to the contention that the shamans viewed the epidemic as unleashed by a superior force embodied by the Russians.

### **Allure of the plant and the metal**

While the Eskimos held the Russians responsible for the smallpox epidemic, there did not appear to be any negative repercussions to their trading relationship. The Russians possessed two trade goods that were in high demand by the Eskimos: tobacco and iron. Captain Cook reported that the Eskimos he encountered in Kuskokwim Bay were unfamiliar with tobacco.<sup>95</sup> However, only a few decades later when the first Russians traveled overland through western Alaska, the Eskimos were devoted consumers of the plant. Prior to direct trade with the Russians, the Eskimos of western Alaska accessed tobacco through the Siberian trade network. In 1789, Russians extending trade across Siberia established a large trading market among the Chukchi people, approximately 1300 kilometers west of the Bering Strait.<sup>96</sup> Eighteenth-century Russian records indicate that Alaskan natives visited the eastern Siberian coast to trade.<sup>97</sup> Edward W.

Nelson's informants in St. Michael told him that “the use of tobacco was introduced among them,

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<sup>94</sup> Zagoskin, 228.

<sup>95</sup> Cook, 366.

<sup>96</sup> Don Dumond, *Demographic Effects of European Expansion: A Nineteenth-Century Native Population on the Alaska Peninsula*, University of Oregon Anthropological Papers, no. 35, 1986, 35.

<sup>97</sup> Black, “The Yup'ik of Western Alaska and Russian Impact,” 24.

before they were brought into direct contact with white men, by means of trade with their Asiatic neighbors, who brought across Bering strait small bundles, called 'hands' of Circassian leaf tobacco.”<sup>98</sup>

The primary source record indicates that the Eskimos highly desired tobacco as a trade item. Russian naval officer Otto Von Kotzebue, whose round-the-world voyage included a foray along the northwest coast of North America, reached St. Lawrence Island in 1816. A group of ten native men paddled towards Kotzebue's boat “without fear, calling aloud to us, and making the most singular motions, holding fox-skins in the air, with which they eagerly beckoned us.” After greeting the Europeans by “stroking themselves several times with both their hands, from the face to the belly, their first word was Tobacco!- of which I had some leaves, handed to them, which they immediately put into their mouths.” Kotzebue also watched the men smoke out of small stone pipes.<sup>99</sup> During V.S. Kromchenko's coastal explorations in 1822 he noted the great pleasure that Eskimos derived from tobacco. “You cannot imagine how much and with what passion the Americans [Eskimos] aboard our ship sniffed ground tobacco,” he wrote, “they preferred it even to the necessities of life.”<sup>100</sup>

In 1834, Russian Creole Andrei Glazunov led an expedition across western Alaska on behalf of the Russian-American Company. Glazunov, tasked with encouraging nearby Eskimos to engage in trade with the newly-established Fort St. Michael, recorded impressions of his interactions with native people. He wrote that the Eskimos of Anvik, initially frightened of the explorers, allowed the party entrance to the *qasgiq*, where Glazunov spoke in front of 240 men. After explaining that the Eskimos could bring furs to the fort in exchange for tobacco and other

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<sup>98</sup> Nelson, 229.

<sup>99</sup> Otto Von Kotzebue, *A Voyage of Discovery into the South Sea and Beering's Straits for the Purpose of Exploring a North-East Passage*, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1821), 189-190.

<sup>100</sup> V.S. Kromchenko, “V.S. Kromchenko's Coastal Explorations in western Alaska, 1822,” *Fieldiana: Anthropology* 64, ed. James W. VanStone, trans. David H. Kraus (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1973), 50.

goods the Eskimos responded positively. According to Glazunov, they “were particularly grateful for the tobacco, which they love passionately, and whose absence they sorely miss.”<sup>101</sup> Forty years later, Bernhard Bendel also observed the native love for tobacco. He describes in colorful detail watching a man who has just sniffed tobacco. “For a few seconds now he will stand motionless,” Bendel wrote, “his face turned upwards and his eyes closed and then fall into a violent fit of sneezing and caughing which seems to give him immense delight, but the performance is enough to turn the stomach of any civilized spectator.”<sup>102</sup>

Besides tobacco, iron also motivated the Eskimos to trade with the Russians. Archaeological excavations have recovered many fragments of iron goods from various sites in western Alaska, demonstrating that the metal was highly useful for the Eskimos. Excavations at Crow Village uncovered a sheet iron frying pan, along with other metal kitchen implements, including a teakettle, pie tin, kettle lids, spoons, and several cast iron fragments, possibly from an iron stove.<sup>103</sup> Traditionally, deceased people were buried with their important possessions and studies of grave sites on Nelson Island showed that some Eskimos were buried with iron kettles or pans.<sup>104</sup> The Yup'ik people reworked iron into objects like fish spear points and ice picks. They also used imported iron goods like nails, files, kettles, and woodworking tools.<sup>105</sup> The Russians also traded guns to the Eskimos. Nelson noted that guns were “common everywhere among the Eskimos.”<sup>106</sup>

Zagoskin describes the trade goods already in use by the local natives when he arrived at

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101Wrangell, 72-73.

102Bernhard Bendel, *1870 Kuskokwim Expedition*, ed. Kurt H. Vitt, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Anchorage: Cornelia Fitger, 1989), 34.

103Wendell H. Oswalt and James W. VanStone, *The Ethnoarcheology of Crow Village, Alaska* (Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., 1967), 65.

104Nelson, 311-313; Hiroaki Okada, et al., *The Qaluyaarmiut: an Anthropological Survey of the western Alaska Eskimos* (Faculty of Letters, Hokkaido University, Sapporo, Japan, 1982), 14.

105James W. VanStone, *Nushagak, an Historic Trading Center in western Alaska*, vol. 62, *Fieldiana: Anthropology* (Chicago, IL: Field Museum Press, 1972), 55, 63-64.

106Nelson, 163.

St. Michael, including “tobacco and iron; they had metal pots, knives and lances, and steel flints.” Zagoskin also commented that, “the coastal natives have adopted such copper and iron kitchen utensils as kettles, pitchers, ladles, and so on. Before that they had made pottery, as they do today on the Kuskokwim and Yukon.” He posited that the Eskimos had access to tobacco and iron mostly through the Siberian trade network.<sup>107</sup> However, with a well-established local trading network developing, the Eskimos could access desirable metal objects more easily than relying on the Siberian trade, which would benefit the Russians economically.

The Russians were quite aware of the impact of indigenous trading on their economic success. In his official history of the Russian-American Company, written in 1863, Petr Tikhmenev characterized the Russian goals for western Alaska. He wrote that “by expanding its fur trading activities to this region the company is trying to prevent the furs from being bartered by the natives living there to the natives of the islands in the Bering Sea and by them to the Chukchi [Siberian Eskimos].”<sup>108</sup> However, the natives received familiar and useful items from the Siberians, and shared a similar culture and language, which may have contributed to the continued strength of their trade in the Russian period.

Despite the ability to provide desirable goods like iron and tobacco, the fur trade in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region was never very profitable for the Russians. Beavers were a common fur-bearing animal in the delta, but by the 1840s the worldwide market for beaver pelts was declining. The Eskimos often brought low-quality pelts to the company traders, which decreased the value of the market. Also, the Russians could not always provide the Eskimos with the most enticing trade items. Because of the transportation and logistical difficulties in moving goods to the Yukon-Kuskokwim trading posts from Russian sites further south, few goods were available

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<sup>107</sup>Zagoskin, 116.

<sup>108</sup>Tikhmenev, 426.

to trade with the locals. When the traders encouraged natives to increase hunting of fur-bearing animals, these attempts often failed because the Eskimos were more interested in simply meeting personal needs with items like tobacco and gun equipment, rather than increasing the number of pelts they traded in order to stockpile extra goods.<sup>109</sup> Like many other Native American tribes that participated in the fur trade, the Yup'ik people weighed the limited economic benefits against the physical exertion and time required to collect furs and chose to minimize their efforts rather than maximize profits.<sup>110</sup> Anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan, a Yup'ik Eskimo scholar, suggests that “cultural need continued to be the determining factor in trade relations, and the Russian attempt to foster a paternalistic pattern of dependence among the Yup'ik Eskimos largely failed.”<sup>111</sup> Despite the economic limitations, occasional violence, and a sense of distrust that was heightened by the Yup'ik response to the smallpox epidemic, the Russians and Eskimos continued to trade because they both perceived benefits in the partnership.

### **Competition for spiritual control**

While the smallpox outbreak did not disrupt trade between the Russians and Eskimos, the epidemic definitely hampered efforts of missionaries in the region. The shamans' ability to explain the smallpox epidemic would have encouraged many Eskimos to ignore the missionary's promises of a new religion, since fitting new information into an existing belief system is much easier than adopting a new belief system to interpret the information. There was little need for the Eskimos to seek out spiritual fulfillment from Russian Orthodoxy when their needs were met by shamans. Certain features of Russian Orthodoxy made the religion palatable to some Eskimos

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<sup>109</sup>Oswalt, 61, 62, 63, 66.

<sup>110</sup>Trigger, 1199-1200.

<sup>111</sup> Ann Fienup-Riordan, *The Real People and the Children of Thunder: The Yup'ik Eskimo Encounter with Moravian Missionaries John and Edith Kilbuck* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 47.

who chose to join the church. However, the religious impact of the missionaries' work is debatable. In times of crisis, as during subsequent epidemics, the Yup'ik people returned to the shamans for healing and guidance, which demonstrates the continuing hold of the shamans over the spiritual lives of the people.

Russian Orthodox missionaries first established a presence in Alaska on Kodiak Island in 1794. Education remained a central goal from the earliest days of the mission. The missionaries sought to educate the natives in basic reading and writing skills and to develop a native clergy. Mikhail, Bishop of Irkutsk, provided the early Russian missionaries with written instructions on proper behavior in Alaska. The document, which eventually became the standard instruction for every Orthodox missionary in the nineteenth century, was “remarkable for the tolerance and understanding of the native cultures, and of local conditions,” it possessed. The missionaries were told to attract converts by example and to avoid interfering with native cultural and social customs.<sup>112</sup> Anthropologist Lydia T. Black characterizes the conversion of Alaska's natives to Russian Orthodoxy as “peaceful, gradual, and effected in the early contact stages by laymen,” who were able to baptize native people they encountered.<sup>113</sup>

Iakov Netsvetov founded the first inland Orthodox Church in 1845 at the Yup'ik village of Ikogmiut.<sup>114</sup> The Creole son of a Russian trader and Aleut woman, Netsvetov spent eighteen years traveling throughout the Yukon-Kuskokwim region. According to Black, his contribution to “the growth of the Orthodox faith in Alaska cannot be overestimated.”<sup>115</sup> Netsvetov recorded his daily life in a journal, which has proven to be a valuable resource in understanding missionary interactions with the Yup'ik natives. Within the first few days of arriving at the mission site,

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<sup>112</sup>Lydia T. Black, introduction to *The Journals of Iakov Netsvetov: The Yukon Years, 1845-1863*, by Iakov Netsvetov, trans. Lydia T. Black, (Ontario, Canada: The Limestone Press, 1984), xii, xiii.

<sup>113</sup>Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 223.

<sup>114</sup>Oswalt, 71.

<sup>115</sup>Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 240, 247.

Netsvetov had already baptized almost all the villagers in Ikogmiut. The journal entry from his seventh day at Ikogmiut reads: “This day the missionary began to preach God's Word, addressing himself specifically to the Ikogmiut inhabitants, the wild ones, as all of them have gathered at this time in the village. As a consequence of this address, 30 adult men received Holy Baptism on the same day.” Conversion was already a part of Yup'ik life before Netsvetov moved into the region. He wrote that many Eskimos had been baptized by laymen before he arrived. Lukin, who oversaw Fort Kolmakov, was one Russian Orthodox member who had conducted baptisms.<sup>116</sup> Lukin was well-liked by the local natives, which may have contributed to their tolerance of Russian Orthodoxy.

Other features of the Russian Orthodoxy conversion experience likely helped the Yup'ik people accept the new faith, at least nominally. The Yup'ik people were not forced to convert to the religion of the missionaries. Netsvetov's journals demonstrate that to the Orthodox missionaries, conversion was a gradual and continuous process. Missionaries tolerated traditional practices because they hoped that the natives would eventually embrace all aspects of the Orthodox life.<sup>117</sup> While the Russians certainly worked to change some Yup'ik religious practices, their leniency toward Yup'ik ceremonies, dances, and other traditions would allow the Yup'ik to retain much of their cultural identity.

Some scholars have argued that Orthodox missionaries were highly successful among the Kuskokwim villages. According to Black, many Native Alaskans embraced Christianity “not through missionary preaching or through incitement by gifts and social advancement” but because Orthodox religion did not require natives to change their daily lives. However, the primary source record does not support Black's argument, at least before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There

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<sup>116</sup>Iakov Netsvetov, *The Journals of Iakov Netsvetov: The Yukon Years, 1845-1863*, trans. Lydia T. Black (Ontario, Canada: The Limestone Press, 1984), 4, 7.

<sup>117</sup>Fienup-Riordan, *Real People*, 136.

were similarities between Russian Orthodoxy and Yup'ik culture that would have facilitated conversion. The public confessions practiced by the Yup'ik were also practiced in the Orthodox religion.<sup>118</sup> Both shared traditional divisions between the sexes; in church, men and women were required to sit on opposite sides. Similarly, housing and daily activities of the Eskimos were divided by gender.<sup>119</sup> Some Eskimos were willing to adapt Russian Orthodoxy to their lifestyles because they recognized similarities to their own culture, which surely reduced the anxieties and problems of conversion.

Both the Russian Orthodox Christmas celebration of *Selaviq*, which remains a common feature of religious life throughout western Alaska, and the Yup'ik seasonal harvest cycle share an emphasis on elaborate feasting that requires preparation for months beforehand. Anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan notes many similarities between the annual Bladder Festival ceremony, which was suppressed by Moravian missionaries in the late nineteenth century, and modern Yup'ik celebrations of *Selaviq*. She argues that “far from reflecting the primacy of the Christian mission, *Selaviq*, in its historical roots, is as much Yup'ik as Orthodox.”<sup>120</sup>

While certain factors assisted the missionaries in their drive to convert the Yup'ik people to Russian Orthodoxy, there were other issues that hindered their efforts. Geographic constraints limited the intensity of Orthodox conversion during the period of Russian occupancy in the region. Only one or two missionaries at a time were present in the area and they had to travel great distances to visit converts. The efforts of the Orthodox missionaries were hampered by scattered and isolated settlements that were often difficult to reach.<sup>121</sup> Netsvetov reported that the Orthodox influence was strongest in the places near his home. Christianity was weaker in places

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118Black, *Russians in Alaska*, 230.

119Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays: Yup'ik Lives and How We See Them* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 113.

120Ibid., 109-122, 120.

121Oswalt and VanStone, 80.



that he could not often visit.<sup>122</sup>

Russian missionaries noted that the smallpox epidemic negatively affected their abilities to convert Yup'ik Eskimos. Hieromonk Theophil, who was stationed at the Nushagak mission in 1863, recorded several natives stating that “Our fathers were wiser than we; they did not trust the Russians and did not wish to be baptized or be given communion.”<sup>123</sup> Father Illarion reported that some Eskimos blamed missionaries specifically for bringing epidemic disease to the region. Illarion recorded a conversation with a group of resistant Eskimos who told him, “We will not be baptised now; first, because there is an epidemic not far from us (at the Kuskokwim Delta) which causes many deaths; second, because you Russian priests have all kinds of diseases.” The man went on to say that “we have smallpox here and it took away many people; this was caused by priests.” Illarion tried to argue that the priests had not given them the disease, but “finally, they became so angry that I stopped talking and ordered my churchman to keep silent in order not to endanger our lives. The natives became bolder and treated us very insolently, but we endured it silently.”<sup>124</sup>

In spite of resistance and suspicion of the Russians, some natives were willing to accept medicines from the missionaries. An important feature of Father Netsvetov's work was treating common illnesses among the local natives. He recorded numerous outbreaks of illnesses during his nearly twenty-year stay at Ikogmiut and often traveled to provide medicines to sick people. In March, 1848, an epidemic of some sickness struck nearby and Netsvetov dispatched an assistant with medicine to the afflicted villagers. When the Eskimo helper returned the next day Netsvetov happily reported that “almost every person given medicine in accordance with [my] prescription

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<sup>122</sup>Tikhmenev, 382.

<sup>123</sup>Dumond, 117.

<sup>124</sup>Father Illarion, “Eskimos and Indians of Western Alaska 1861-1868: Extracts from the Diary of Father Illarion,” ed. Wendell H. Oswalt, *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska* 8 no. 2 (1960): 114.

was better.” There were plenty of opportunities for the missionary to treat sick people. The list of illnesses described in Netsvetov's journal is lengthy, and a few examples will give an indication of how often sickness swept through the region. In June 1848 he identified an epidemic of coughing among residents at St. Michael. In March 1849 a combination of cough, headache, and throat-ache afflicted many people around Ikogmiut. The winter of 1850 saw a widespread epidemic. Netsvetov describes the illness in detail. “Suddenly there is an onset of a severe headache, with chest pains and weakness in all limbs,” he wrote. “A man may feel perfectly well during the day and by evening be so sick, that he will be unable to walk or to stand up.”<sup>125</sup> However, it must be noted that these illnesses were not generally life-threatening. Netsvetov does not describe deaths occurring from these illnesses. Instead, they appear to be yearly bouts of colds, respiratory infections, and other annoying, but minor, illnesses. Netsvetov does not indicate whether shamans also treated the people for these afflictions.

Measles may have hit western Alaska in 1851. While Netsvetov could often provide useful medicines to Eskimos who lived near the mission at Ikogmiut or who he encountered on his extensive travels in the region, he had nothing to help people affected by the sickness. He was obviously anguished by the terrible effects of the disease. “What to do? How to help?” he asked, “I cannot even help myself or my own people. The medicines which I give out have no effect. At best, they keep the sickness from getting more severe. Besides, my store of medicines has been depleted to the least quantity, as this time none were sent to me.” Netsvetov did not report high overall death rates from the epidemic, which indicates that the illness may have been something other than measles, which often had a high death rate among unexposed populations. Mostly young children and older people seemed to have perished.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup>Netsvetov, 84, 95, 132, 190.

<sup>126</sup>Ibid., 265, 271, 273, 280.

Despite the Russian missionaries' dispensation of medicines, the shamans retained a powerful hold over the Yup'ik people. Anthropologist Don Dumond postulates that the most common cause of death among the Nushagak Eskimos in the nineteenth century was respiratory disease, such as influenza and pneumonia. He also found that the population was aging over the second half of the nineteenth century, which indicates a decreasing fertility rate.<sup>127</sup> Missionary medicine could not cure respiratory sicknesses like influenza and pneumonia, which may have contributed to the shamans' enduring power. Frustration with the continued importance of the shamans sometimes came out in the diaries kept by Father Netsvetov. In January, 1846 Father Netsvetov described visiting a *qasgiq* because “of the discovery of superstitions among the newly baptised.” While he does not specify the superstitions, it was highly likely that he heard about the shamans practicing some traditional ceremony or healing an ill person. Netsvetov also expressed consternation at how easily the Eskimos vacillated in their conversion. He wrote that the Eskimos “at times listen and agree and promise to fulfill what is demanded, later on, at a meeting or other occasions they change and do the contrary and even persuade others. Inconstant is this folk!”<sup>128</sup>

Father Illarion, who arrived at Fort Kolmakov in 1861 to replace Father Netsvetov, also kept a journal of his years in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region. He served western Alaska until 1868.<sup>129</sup> Young George R. Adams met the priest on a riverbank while traveling down the Yukon River as part of the Western Union Telegraph Expedition. He describes Illarion as “a man nearly seven feet tall, very thin, dressed in a long, tight fitting black robe, that reached to his feet, and tightly buttoned from his neck down, and a round sugar loaf hat that fitted tight to his head, and

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<sup>127</sup>Don Dumond, *Demographic Effects of European Expansion: A Nineteenth-Century Native Population on the Alaska Peninsula*, University of Oregon Anthropological Papers, No. 35 (1986): 29, 31.

<sup>128</sup>*Ibid.*, 12, 57.

<sup>129</sup>Wendell H. Oswalt, introduction to “Eskimos and Indians of Western Alaska 1861-1868: Extracts from the Diary of Father Illarion,” by Father Illarion, ed. Wendell H. Oswalt, *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska* 8 no. 2 (1960): 101.

was two feet high to a point on top.”<sup>130</sup>

Father Illarion reported that many Eskimos resisted his efforts to dampen the power of shamans. He described the events of his stay at Tulukanagmute village. “Among the subjects, we touched upon shamanism which they (although baptised) cannot yet entirely discard,” the priest wrote. “When I told them how severely God punished and even exterminated the people for similar sins in ancient times, they replied, 'You Russians have priests and doctors, but we have none. If any one happens to fall ill, who can help us except the shaman?’” He continues, “Similar replies I hear very often during my talks with the natives...” Illarion also wrote that, “It is easier for them [Eskimos] to lose their lives than to discard shamanism...”<sup>131</sup>

The journals of Father Netsvetov and Father Illarion indicate that while the Yup'ik people were sometimes willing to convert to the Russian Orthodoxy religion, they still maintained faith in the shamans as healers in times of serious illness. The depth of the conversion experience is difficult to quantify because there are no written records from Yup'ik converts. Non-missionary visitors to western Alaska all concluded that Christianity had little effect on most Eskimos. Glazunov reported visiting with a group of Eskimos from the Kuskokwim River who said that they had been baptized by Fedor Kolmakov, manager of Aleksandrovskiy Redoubt. The Eskimos then asked Glazunov “to explain the meaning of baptism and also to baptise the local inhabitants,” which indicates that they did not have any clear understanding of Russian Orthodoxy.<sup>132</sup> In the late 1870s, after thirty years of a missionary presence in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region, Edward William Nelson claimed that the Yup'ik people still practiced traditional spirituality, despite the influence of Russian Orthodox missionaries. He argued that

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<sup>130</sup>George R. Adams, *Life on the Yukon, 1865-1867*, Alaska History no. 22. ed. Richard A. Pierce (Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press, 1982), 97.

<sup>131</sup>Illarion, 113, 114.

<sup>132</sup>Wrangell, 77.

“during my residence there [Fort St. Michael] not a half dozen full-blood Eskimo could be found in all that region who really understood and believed in the white man's religion, and not one could be found who did not believe implicitly in the power of the shamans and in the religious rites handed down by the elders.”<sup>133</sup> William H. Dall, who stayed at St. Michael in 1866, reported that many Eskimos with whom he interacted “have been christened by the Russian missionaries, but none have any idea of Christianity.”<sup>134</sup> In another context, Dall dryly included in his descriptions of western Alaska, “An inefficient priest, with a few alleged converts, conducted as a mission of the Greek church the only religious establishment in the whole Yukon valley.”<sup>135</sup>

George R. Adams, who arrived in St. Michael with Dall, witnessed the local priest convert Eskimos at St. Michael. Although he does not name this priest, we can assume he is referring to Father Illarion. While standing on a high rock at the ocean shore, the priest blessed the water with a bowl of incense, then directed a group of men to wade into the water and dip themselves under three times. Adams wrote that “the water was icy cold and the howls and contortions of the men in the water was an amusing sight to an unregenerate audience like myself.” The women repeated the men's actions, but without an audience. After the baptism, the converts attended a communion service dinner of tea, sugar, fish, and cake. Adams caustically added, “I was sceptic enough to imagine that the prospect of the feast was the incentive for the conversion.”<sup>136</sup>

Others also indicated that the promise of gifts may have enticed some to adopt Christianity. Father Veniaminov traveled to Nushagak to baptize the natives and gave each a bronze cross. He reported that the practice of handing out more valuable presents upon baptism was stopped because the Siberian Chukchi had been going from priest to priest to get baptized

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<sup>133</sup>Nelson, 421.

<sup>134</sup>Dall, 145.

<sup>135</sup>William H. Dall, *Alaska As It Was and Is, 1865-1895*, Philosophical Society of Washington Bulletin 13 (1895): 131.

<sup>136</sup>Adams, 100.

and then receive presents.<sup>137</sup> Nelson also recorded the interest in crosses expressed by the Yup'ik people. He noticed that “By gifts of small metal crosses, which the people wore as ornaments, and by other means, they were occasionally induced to attend church service.”<sup>138</sup> Frederick Whympers, an artist employed by the Western Union Telegraph Company, stayed at St. Michaels in 1866. He observed, “In the case of Indians, they are baptized in the sea at this fort, and rumour says that some of them have been so christianized many years in succession, in order that they may obtain small gilt crosses and other presents given them at such times.”<sup>139</sup> The crosses bestowed by priests may have played a far more crucial role in Yup'ik life than simple ornamentation. Amulets were often used to assist in hunting, protect against disease, and cure those already afflicted by illness.<sup>140</sup> Any object could be utilized as an amulet and be imbibed by the shaman with spirit powers.<sup>141</sup> While there are no sources to document this hypothesis, the Eskimos may have viewed the metal crosses as amulets to help ward off sickness or assist in hunting, which would have provided a motive to accept baptism. Or, the shamans could have bestowed spiritual power on the items. Regardless of whether or not crosses held significance for the Eskimos, the primary source record does indicate that conversion was generally a superficial experience in the early decades of missionary presence in the region.

## Conclusion

Due to the limits imposed by geographic isolation, the Yup'ik Eskimos had late and intermittent contact with outsiders. The Russians were motivated to explore western Alaska to

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<sup>137</sup>Veniaminov, 53.

<sup>138</sup>Nelson, 421.

<sup>139</sup>Frederick Whympers, “A Journey from Norton Sound, Bering Sea, to Fort Youkon (Junction of Porcupine and Youkon Rivers),” *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 38, (1868): 221-222.

<sup>140</sup>Fienup-Riordan, *Boundaries and Passages*, 201.

<sup>141</sup> Margaret Lantis, “The Social Culture of the Nunivak Eskimo,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* vol. 35, part 3 (Lancaster, PA: Lancaster Press, Inc. ,1946), 204, 239.

expand the fur trade; they had no interest in permanently settling the region and so did not try to remake the indigenous culture. Instead, major change first arrived in the form of epidemic disease, the earliest being smallpox. While the Yup'ik people were devastated by the disease, they did regroup, and the shamans fulfilled their roles as spiritual healers by helping the people understand the epidemic within their existing belief system. Traditional understanding of disease and the specific abilities of shamans, including the power to cause sickness, allowed the shamans to explain the epidemic in the context of the Yup'ik worldview. The fallout of the smallpox epidemic included deep suspicion of Russian traders, although their desirable goods encouraged the Eskimos to continue trading. The Russian Orthodox missionaries who followed the traders into western Alaska generally encountered resistance to their efforts because the shamans held a strong sway over the Eskimos. The conversion experience seems to have been superficial for most Eskimos, based on the primary sources and the continuing importance of shamans. While the shamans had seen their dominance threatened first by the arrival of epidemic diseases, which threatened their status as healers, and then by missionaries, who hoped to gently convert the Eskimos to Russian Orthodoxy, the majority of Eskimos continued to rely on the shamans for spiritual guidance and healing. In the decades after the American government purchased Alaska, the shamans would face new and persistent challenges to their authority in the form of Moravian missionaries.

## **Chapter 4: American Control: God, Government, and the “Great Sickness”**

Hooker left the small mission settlement of Bethel on April 1, 1890. He had just spent a productive week receiving instruction from Moravian missionaries John and Edith Kilbuck concerning his duties as a native helper for the Moravian Church. Two days later reports reached the Kilbucks that Hooker had gone insane. John Kilbuck was actually upriver tending to another case of insanity when he learned of Hooker's condition. He rushed home and quickly prepared for the trip to Kwethluk, where Hooker lived. When Kilbuck arrived in Kwethluk late that night, Hooker's stony-faced relatives greeted him with silence. Kilbuck was ushered in to see the insane man, gave Hooker morphine pills to calm him, and then settled down to sleep. Soon after, Hooker's younger brother awakened the missionary and told him to leave immediately. The family blamed the Kilbucks for Hooker's sickness, and thought that if the missionary left, Hooker would become well. As Kilbuck packed his medical equipment onto a borrowed sled, villagers brought all the material items that they had received from the mission to place on the sled. The people were cleansing themselves of the missionaries' influence.

After a tense and hasty departure, the missionary turned around about 100 yards down the trail and saw that the entire village, a “black mass,” pursued him. As they came closer, Kilbuck could hear the people singing Russian Orthodox songs. Mountain Boy, Hooker's half-brother, loudly proclaimed himself God in front of the missionary. The people of Kwethluk turned around and went back to their village, allowing a shaky Kilbuck to return home.

Soon after Kilbuck's banishment from Kwethluk, Hooker seemed to recover. In Bethel, the missionaries celebrated Easter with their small native congregation. A few days later, the Kilbucks learned that Hooker was dead. John Kilbuck heard of the disturbing circumstances



surrounding Hooker's death soon after. Apparently, while the men of Kwethluk were taking a sweat bath in the *qasgiq*, Mountain Boy announced that Hooker was now a saved man and could go to heaven. Mountain Boy and another man led Hooker away from the village. The people followed and watched as Hooker was torn to death by the village dogs.<sup>1</sup>

The series of events that led to Hooker's death exemplifies the tensions that developed between the Yup'ik people and the Moravian missionaries who came to the Yukon-Kuskokwim region in the mid-1880s. As a resident helper for the Moravian Church, Brother Hooker was tasked with preaching the Gospel in Kwethluk. He succeeded in convincing the Kwethluk Eskimos to burn their dance masks and was responsible for the conversion of many people from the Russian Orthodox Church to the Moravian Church. Hooker may have felt terrible mental and physical strain if the people of Kwethluk judged him a transgressor of Yup'ik culture, which could have precipitated his temporary descent into insanity. Mountain Boy was probably a shaman, and apparently he resented Brother Hooker's influence over the Kwethluk Eskimos. Mountain Boy hoped that Hooker's murder would eliminate Christian influence in the village. Instead, Hooker became a martyr for Christian Eskimos in the region.<sup>2</sup>

The Yup'ik Eskimos had enjoyed relative isolation during the Russian period and retained a stable traditional culture, despite the intrusion of Russian Orthodoxy, the fur trade, and the repercussions of the smallpox epidemic. The transfer of Alaska to the United States would test the strength of the Yup'ik people in new ways. Dramatic political and economic changes accompanied the numerous Americans whose dreams of furs and gold led them to the Yukon-Kuskokwim area. Moravian missionaries brought “far more than a spiritual message to the

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1 John Kilbuck and Edith Kilbuck, *The Yup'ik Eskimos: As Described in the Travel Journals and Ethnographic Accounts of John and Edith Kilbuck who served with the Alaska Mission of the Moravian Church, 1886-1900*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan (Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press, 1988), 73-77.

2 Wendell Oswalt, *Bashful No Longer: An Alaskan Eskimo Ethnohistory, 1778-1988* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 89.

Kuskokwim. With them came everything from soap to the institution of marriage- in that order.”<sup>3</sup>

In the face of intense pressure, Yup'ik culture evolved to incorporate new and decidedly American ideals, values, and institutions. Despite the cultural flux of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Yup'ik people continued to look towards their shamans to heal some ailments, even though the Moravians offered many practical medicines for common illnesses. After the devastating double epidemic of influenza and measles in 1900, the Eskimos were disillusioned by the inability of their Moravian doctor to save them from the widespread death, and so, once again, turned to the shamans for answers and healing, just as they had in the Russian era.

### **The End of the Russian Era**

In the mid-nineteenth century, Russia lost interest in its Alaskan possession. Following the costly Crimean War, which lasted from 1853 to 1856, Russian government officials began to debate the wisdom of holding onto the faraway and isolated territory. Events in Alaska in the 1850s also contributed to a perception that the territory's value was declining. A series of inept Russian-American Company administrators damaged relations with Tlingit villages around the capital, leading to several native attacks on the company headquarters in the 1850s. As a result, economic profits fell. The capable John Hampus Furuhielm was appointed to command the Russian-American Company in 1859. Over the next few years he worked to restore good relations with the Tlingit and to improve the company's financial position. In 1862, the company's Third Charter from the Russian government expired. While Russian-American Company officials worked to re-negotiate a new charter, some critics expressed growing

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3 Ann Fienup-Riordan, *The Real People and the Children of Thunder: The Yup'ik Eskimo Encounter with Moravian Missionaries John and Edith Kilbuck* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 76.

concerns over developments on the North American continent and about the company's practices.<sup>4</sup>

After gold was discovered in British Columbia in the late 1850s, many gold-seekers rushed north to scour the rivers bordering Russian America territory. The Russian government knew gold was present in Alaska and worried that Britain or the United States might begin scheming to take over the unprotected territory. Additionally, some argued that Russia needed to focus its military and financial resources on newly-acquired territories in the Far East. Others criticized the Russian-American Company's activities in Alaska, claiming that the company exploited Russian employees and did not do enough to civilize the natives.<sup>5</sup> Those who wished to be rid of Alaska found a willing buyer in U.S. Secretary of State William Henry Seward, an ardent supporter of American expansionism. Although some disapproved of the \$7,200,000 price tag, Seward had strong allies in Congress, the press, and, most importantly, in the Russian Minister Baron Edouard de Stoeckl. Encouraged by amicable relations with the United States, as well as the American government's willingness to pay the asking price, Russia signed a treaty to turn over their North American possession in 1867.<sup>6</sup>

Once Alaska came under American control, the territory's character changed dramatically. Under the treaty terms, Russians who wished to remain in Alaska would gain American citizenship, but most left for British Columbia and California, or returned home to Russia. Most traces of Russian culture were quickly covered by the influx of Americans, still under the spell of “Manifest Destiny,” who flooded the newly-acquired territory. Unlike many in America's westward settlement, those who went north to Alaska did not wish to acquire land for farming.

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4 Lydia T. Black, *Russians in Alaska: 1732-1867* (Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 2004), 267-269.

5 Ibid., 273-275, 280.

6 Ted C. Hinckley, *The Americanization of Alaska, 1867-1897* (Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books, 1972), 19-20.

Instead they hoped to earn their riches from land speculation and mining.<sup>7</sup> The American government was poorly equipped to manage a distant territory and the early years of American Alaska were lawless and confused. Over the next few decades, as more people came to Alaska, and especially following the Klondike gold strikes of 1896, the federal government extended control over the territory.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Americanization of the Yup'ik Eskimos: Economic and Social Changes**

Not much changed for the Yup'ik Eskimos in the first years of American control, but by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Yukon-Kuskokwim region witnessed economic development and population growth as whites flooded the region. The American firm Hutchinson, Kohl & Company bought the assets of the Russian-American Company and stationed an agent in the Kuskokwim region. The monopoly over western Alaska by a single fur trading company repeated the Russian pattern familiar to the Eskimos and the fur trade remained stable. The first company agent, Reinhold Searé, settled at Fort Kolmakovskiy and made use of the existing structures at the fort. Some Russian workers stayed on in western Alaska and worked for Searé or Edward Lind, who took over Searé's job of managing the fort in the 1880s. The Hutchinson, Kohl & Company traders retained a minimal influence over the economic practices of the local population until around 1900, when other trading posts and independent traders established themselves along the Kuskokwim River. Shipping goods to the region became much easier when Hutchinson, Kohl & Company, later renamed the Alaska Commercial Company, began stocking the region from oceangoing ships that arrived at St. Michael, which also increased the amount of

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7 Ibid., 23.

8 Claus M. Naske and Herman E. Slotnick, *Alaska: A History of the 49<sup>th</sup> State* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 57, 78.

trade goods available to the Eskimos.<sup>9</sup> St. Michael preserved its position as a central fur-trading station. Every year a small stern-wheel steamer left St. Michael in July and headed up the Yukon River to visit the various trading outposts and collect furs. The steamer returned before the river closed in October.<sup>10</sup>

The Alaskan gold rush brought people to Nome, Alaska, north of the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta, between 1899 and 1900. Nome quickly grew to a tent-city of 20,000 people, packed onto a mere six-mile stretch of beach.<sup>11</sup> Prospectors penetrated other areas of western Alaska to search for gold deposits as well. Reports of a gold strike on the Yellow River, a tributary to the Kuskokwim, beckoned miners in 1900. Hundreds of men soon arrived in the delta region to scour the numerous rivers for gold flakes. However, the strike proved to be a failure. Miners returned to the region in the summer of 1906 to pursue reports of gold on the upper Kuskokwim. This time the strike was legitimate, and mining camps sprang up at Moore City and Ophir on the Yukon River. The camps were more accessible by riverboat from the Kuskokwim River, which led to an economic boom for the Yup'ik Eskimos. George Fredericks found gold along the middle Kuskokwim and established Georgetown in 1909, attracting about three hundred gold seekers to the spot, although the town was abandoned a few years later after the gold deposits proved paltry.<sup>12</sup>

The Eskimos found many employment opportunities with the arrival of outsiders. Furs remained a major trade item through the 1950s and some white traders and trappers settled in villages along the rivers. Local men found employment transferring goods from the ocean-going ships to the shore. The Kuskokwim River became a popular riverboat route as whites settled

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9 Oswalt, 74-77.

10 George W. Bailey, *Report upon Alaska and its People* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880), 15.

11 Robert J. Wolfe, "Alaska's Great Sickness, 1900: An Epidemic of Measles and Influenza in a Virgin Soil Population," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 126, no. 2 (1982): 95.

12 Oswalt, 95, 101-103.

upstream. Some Eskimo men were able to generate income by supplying wood to fuel the riverboats. According to anthropologist Wendell Oswalt, “cutting cordwood was an important early step in the villagers' shift from barter to a cash economy.” Supplying cordwood fit well with the existing Eskimo lifestyle because the men could work on their own schedules and independently. Some Yup'ik people also profited economically from the growth of overland transportation. In 1908, government surveyors laid out a winter route that provided year-round access to western Alaska. This overland route from the south increased the number of dog teams that traveled to the Yukon-Kuskokwim region bearing mail, freight, and passengers. Eskimos sold dried salmon to feed the dog teams and their drivers, which provided another economic opportunity that fit well with their existing lifestyles, especially after the introduction of the fish wheel by gold miners.<sup>13</sup>

New technologies greatly influenced Yup'ik practices in the early twentieth century. The Eskimos rapidly replaced aboriginal practices of fish traps and weirs with fish wheels because they increased the salmon catch and decreased the required human effort. Also, a bigger catch provided extra fish to sell to whites. The fish wheel proved to have far-reaching effects on Eskimo life. Once the wheel had been built and placed in the river, men found themselves with more free time to pursue other economic activities. On the other hand, women had to work much harder to process the fish. With all the extra fish, people could keep larger dog teams, which provided families with increased mobility for subsistence and visiting. White traders encouraged the use of steel traps to catch fur-bearing animals and also imported breechloading firearms to the area as trade goods, which changed Yup'ik hunting practices. Prospectors brought plank boats to the rivers and Eskimos discovered that the boats allowed them to check nets and fish wheels from

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 75, 97-98, 115.

their home village, reducing the need to move seasonally to fish camps. Also, to buy boat motors and keep them working, Eskimos needed to get store credit or cash, which increased their reliance on the the cash economy.<sup>14</sup> In 1900, the Moravian missionary Joseph Weinlick noted that “the natives are already spoilt in regard to wages, they all demand big pay for their work, and they would not do anything for the Mission without pay.”<sup>15</sup>

The gold-seekers and traders brought American political and social institutions to western Alaska. U.S. commissioners, responsible for recording mining claims, were stationed at populous gold rush camps. A U.S. marshal and a circuit judge then arrived to uphold the laws. By the late 1920s, government agents began to enforce game regulations, which led to confusion and anger among Eskimos. Some people were even jailed for refusing to follow the laws regarding taking fur-bearing animals out of season. According to Oswalt, as late as the 1950s, some Eskimos continued to express resentment about the activities of early enforcement agents.<sup>16</sup>

A trader's decision to open a store in a village impacted daily life dramatically. Usually a few whites would follow the trader and settle in the village or close by. These white men often married Eskimo women and their children were presumably raised learning both cultures. The men prospected in the summer and trapped or cut wood in the winter. American settlers would eventually agitate for postal service, and when a post office was granted, one would take on the job of postmaster. The men, now raising families, would establish a school, and medical and social services, all “controlled by whites and serving the needs they felt were vital.”<sup>17</sup> While outright clashes between Eskimos and white settlers were few, social separation is evident in the

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14 Ibid., 112-114.

15 *Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen for the Year Ending August 25, 1901* (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Publication Office, 1901), 37.

16 Oswalt, 106, 119.

17 Ibid., 69, 123.

few references to Eskimos in books published by traders, miners, and prospectors.<sup>18</sup> Most interactions between whites and Eskimos were restricted to business-related exchanges and, occasional marriages aside, did not yet extend to social interactions.<sup>19</sup>

The influx of American traders and gold miners to western Alaska after 1867 brought significant changes to Eskimo economic, political, and social practices. However, the most dramatic alterations came in the form of Moravian missionaries, who worked energetically to mold all facets of Yup'ik life to their Christian ideals. While they converted many people to the Moravian faith, these missionaries also encountered obstacles from the Russian Orthodox Church and, more importantly, from the powerful shamans who still controlled Yup'ik healing and spirituality.

### **The Moravian Mission: To Evangelize the Heathens**

The Moravian Church sent its first missionaries to western Alaska in 1885. These men and women brought with them a set of religious and cultural attitudes that would seriously conflict with the Yup'ik culture. Unlike the Russian Orthodox missionaries, the Moravians were bent on changing Eskimo lifestyles and suppressing traditional practices. The Moravian missionaries were numerous, organized, and willing to travel far and wide to convert Yup'ik Eskimos. They scored widespread success among the local inhabitants by providing medical care, which would affect the shamans' roles and status as healers.

The Moravian Church originated among Protestant Christians in fifteenth-century central Europe. After suffering through two centuries of religious persecution, the Moravians finally found refuge on the east German estate of Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf in 1722. Rather than

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18 Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays: Yup'ik Lives and How We See Them* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 26.

19 Oswalt, 104.



spreading the church's gospel in Europe to increase membership, the small group decided to focus their missionary efforts on those they deemed less fortunate. Moravian missionaries traveled across the world in the eighteenth century, including Greenland, North America, South Africa, Russia, Persia, and Jamaica, to share their Christian message. Missionaries not only wanted to educate indigenous groups in the Christian faith, but also to establish native churches that would be under the independent care and guidance of local natives. The Moravian Church became established among immigrants in the United States and gained self-determination status from the German parent church in 1857.<sup>20</sup>

The meeting of the American Moravians with Presbyterian Sheldon Jackson would provide the spark to start the Alaskan mission. The passionate Presbyterian minister had first worked among Minnesota Indians in 1858.<sup>21</sup> Over the next twelve years of service, Jackson developed a desire to convert and educate Native Americans to protect them not only from white exploitation, but also the evil effects of liquor. In 1885 he was appointed the First District General Agent of Education and set about establishing an educational system across Alaska.<sup>22</sup> Jackson also supported the introduction of reindeer herding in Alaska to encourage the Eskimos to become civilized. As Frank C. Churchill wrote in 1906, “one can hardly suggest anything in the way of occupation of economic value that would be better or more helpful in the barren North...”<sup>23</sup> Reindeer and instructors were imported from neighboring Siberia in 1894, and brought to western Alaska in 1901. By the late 1940s the reindeer herds of the Yukon-

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20 James W. Henkelman and Kurt H. Vitt, *The History of the Alaska Moravian Church 1885-1985: Harmonious to Dwell* (Bethel, Alaska: The Tundra Press, 1985), 4-5, 7, 9.

21 Robert Laird Stewart, *Sheldon Jackson* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908), 38.

22 Richard L. Dauenhauer, “The Missions to Alaska,” *The Pacific Historian* 26, no. 1 (1982): 34, 36.

23 Frank C. Churchill, “Reports on the Condition of Educational and School Service and the management of Reindeer Service in the District of Alaska,” Senate Documents, Vol. 6 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1906), 41.

Kuskokwim area disappeared, however, largely due to a lack of Eskimo interest in herding.<sup>24</sup>

Jackson also hoped to improve the native condition through the civilizing influence of missionaries. He found a receptive audience among the Moravian Church members. At an August, 1883, meeting of the Society of the United Brethren for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen, President E. de Schweinitz read a letter from Jackson in which “the establishment by our Church of a Mission *in Alaska* among Indians and Eskimos was urged.” After “considerable discussion,” the Moravian members passed a resolution to send someone to investigate Alaska's potential as a missionary field.<sup>25</sup>

Henry Hartmann, a missionary stationed in New Fairfield, Canada, and William Weinland were tasked with traveling to Alaska to explore the possibility of extending missionary work to the region. They arrived in Unalaska on May 16, 1884, and met with several people who recommended western Alaska as a possible area to establish a mission, since the natives there were “peaceable and inoffensive.” The two missionaries caught a boat to Nushagak and arrived on June 2, 1884. They met with the Russian Orthodox missionary still living near Fort Alexander. According to Hartmann, the Russian claimed 2,476 natives among his congregation. He suggested to Hartmann that the Moravian missionaries travel north to the Kuskokwim River, “an unoccupied field” waiting for the Christian message.<sup>26</sup>

A few days later Hartmann and Weinland arrived at the mouth of the Kuskokwim River and left the steam ship for the native bidarkas [canoes] that would take them up the river.

Hartmann wrote, “A strange feeling came over me, when, parting from the company of our

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<sup>24</sup> Oswalt, 107, 110.

<sup>25</sup> *Proceedings of the One Hundred and Seventh General Meeting and Ninety-Sixth Anniversary of the Society of the United Brethren for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen, August, 23, 1883* (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Publication Office, 1883), 5-6.

<sup>26</sup> J.A.H. Hartmann, “Diary of an Exploratory Journey to Alaska,” in *Periodical Accounts Relating to the Missions of the Church of the United Brethren*, Vol. 33 (London: Brethren Society, 1884), 249, 250, 251-252.

friends, we sailed alone over this wide expanse of water in our frail skin-boats.”<sup>27</sup> The missionaries were guided up the river by the trader Edward Lind and a group of Yup'ik men. Weinland recorded his impressions of the Eskimos in a diary. He noted numerous positive interactions with the men who led the group, and described one Eskimo as “tall, strong and of a lively disposition.”<sup>28</sup> Weinland expressed interest in learning about the Yup'ik belief system and, through a translator, he questioned Eskimos about Yup'ik spirituality. He asked about conceptions of death and observed that, “Whenever sickness precedes death, they think that death is the natural consequence of nature. But if death happens suddenly without sickness preceding, then they blame it on a shaman.” Weinland described a shaman like this: “If he is able to perform some wonder, or do what appears to the others to be a miracle, his claim is established. If he can cure the sick, he is a shaman right then and there.” Shamans could “charm the disease and thus expell it.” He also noted that the Yup'ik people believed that shamans caused sickness and could cure sickness.<sup>29</sup> Based on this exchange in 1884, the Yup'ik people obviously still displayed a strong faith in their shamans' curative powers, as well as their role in causing disease.

Weinland's writings display marked cultural prejudice and furnish insight into missionary views of the Eskimos as well as goals for re-shaping Yup'ik spirituality. For instance, he declared, “When we at first saw how the Eskimos generally live, we could not picture to ourselves the circumstances which would induce us to enter one of their dwellings with the intention of remaining there for any length of time, much less did we ever think of taking a meal with the Eskimos!” However, Weinland expressed delight upon meeting the creole trader Nicolai

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27 Ibid., 254, 255.

28 William H. Weinland, “Extracts from the Report of the Missionary Exploratory Expedition to Alaska,” in *Periodical Accounts Relating to the Missions of the Church of the United Brethren*, Vol. 33 (London: Brethren Society, 1884), 263.

29 Wendell Oswalt, *Mission of Change in Alaska: Eskimos and Moravians on the Kuskokwim* (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1963), 72.

Kolmolkoshen, who inhabited a clean Russian-style log cabin and had an Eskimo wife who wore a neat calico dress and white kerchief. Weinland was happy to dine with these “civilized” Eskimos, who served bread, butter, and tea to their American guests.<sup>30</sup> The missionary also decided that the Yup'ik Eskimos would be well-served by the Christian message. He wrote that currently, “The religion taught them, has no effect upon their outward life whatever. They are left in their barbarous, filthy state just the same as though there were no priests and no God.”<sup>31</sup>

After a lengthy survey of the region, Weinland and Hartmann decided that the village of Mumtrekhlagamute provided the perfect location for a Moravian mission. Upon sighting Mumtrekhlagamute, Hartmann wrote, “we were greatly cheered by the view of this station, situated on a high bank, with a back-ground of pine forest.” Hartmann further proclaimed that their Bible reading of the morning, “God said unto Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there, and make there an alter unto God that appeared unto thee,” seemed to indicate that “the Lord were now speaking to us these worlds, and were thereby pointing out the place for our future operations among the Eskimos.” Practical considerations also influenced the missionaries to choose Mumtrekhlagamute. Kolmolkoshen, who had obviously made a fine impression on the missionaries, manned an Alaska Commercial Company trading station at the site. The trader could help the missionaries learn the Yup'ik language. Also, Hartmann contended that, “A number of Eskimos visiting the station for trading purposes, and bringing their children with them, would come within our reach, and might, by the influence of the traders, be induced to leave their children under our care.”<sup>32</sup>

After returning to Pennsylvania in September, 1884, Hartmann and Weinland recommended that the Moravian Church establish a mission named Bethel at

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30 Weinland, 264.

31 Oswalt, *Mission of Change*, 39.

32 Hartmann, 259-260.

Mumtrekhlagamute. The pair also reported that the village of Nushagak, where they stayed on their way to the Kuskokwim, would be a suitable location to start a school, although the presence of a Russian Orthodox missionary there might hamper conversion. Reverend Frank Wolff, his wife Mary, and Mary Huber would be the earliest missionaries to serve at the Carmel mission near Nushagak. They arrived in June, 1887, almost two years after their associates established the Bethel mission.<sup>33</sup>

The first group of Moravian missionaries sent to western Alaska included William Weinland and his wife Caroline, John and Edith Kilbuck, and Hans Torgersen. The small party arrived at the mouth of the Kuskokwim on June 19, 1885. Only the Kilbucks would remain in Bethel for a number of years. Torgersen drowned soon after arriving at the new mission site. Due to ill health, the Weinlands would leave Bethel after only two years.<sup>34</sup> The missionaries' initial impressions of the Eskimos who greeted them at the river were favorable, according to John Kilbuck, who recorded events of the first days in a letter later published by the Moravian Church. He enthusiastically reported that “the Eskimos will prove to be very willing scholars...they possess good memories.”<sup>35</sup>

The copious writings of John Kilbuck and his wife, Edith, provide crucial insight into early Moravian activities on the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta. They not only wrote many letters to friends, family, and the Moravian Church headquarters, but also kept detailed journals that display a variety of deeply personal thoughts, joys, and frustrations from their decades in western Alaska. The couple provided ethnographic and historical information that proved immensely important to scholars of the Yup'ik Eskimos. John Kilbuck was especially prolific and, with his command of the Yup'ik language, gained uncommon insight into Eskimo culture. Kilbuck

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33 Henkelman, 64.

34 Ibid., 64.

35 Kilbuck, 86-86.

displayed a natural proclivity for learning and crossing cultural boundaries from a young age. He was born on a Delaware reservation in Kansas in 1861. At the age of twelve, Kilbuck, who had been marked as an exceptional student at the Moravian mission school on the reservation, was sent to Nazareth, Pennsylvania, to attend the Moravian institution there. He went on to excel at the Moravian College and then the Theological Seminary in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. In 1884, Kilbuck became the first Delaware Indian to be ordained as a deacon in the Moravian Church.<sup>36</sup> Edith Romig, the daughter of Moravian Reverend Joseph Romig, also lived a life that prepared her well for missionary service. She grew up in frontier Kansas and taught at a Moravian school for Native Americans before marrying Kilbuck in 1885, just before their departure for Alaska.<sup>37</sup>

After arriving at Bethel, the missionaries immediately set about constructing a home. Early building efforts were hampered by the death of Torgersen, who was the only knowledgeable carpenter among the group. The missionaries struggled through the building process, despite ill health, and were able to move into a single house in early October just as snow started to fall.<sup>38</sup> The missionaries made slow progress because they did not utilize native technology. After struggling to dig into the layer of permafrost under the ground and finding the wood they brought from California to be useless after the summer rains, Kilbuck and Weinland managed to build their small mission house with the help of Lind, the local trader. Home construction served a function beyond mere shelter. The missionaries wanted to build houses that relied on Western technology adapted to the situation of western Alaska. They hoped that the Eskimos would eventually follow their example and also build wood frame homes, which were deemed more civilized than sod houses.<sup>39</sup>

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36 Fienup-Riordan, *Real People*, 19, 23, 25.

37 Henkelman, 13.

38 Kilbuck, 64, 66, 70.

39 Fienup-Riordan, *Real People*, 77.

After completing the arduous task of building, the missionaries concentrated on learning the Yup'ik language. Kilbuck described their strategy like this: "The evenings were spent in comparing the words each one had learned during the day, and in exchanging words-- each one kept a list of all the words the entire party had gathered."<sup>40</sup> The missionaries had counted on the assistance of the native trader Nicolai Kolmolkoshen to translate in the early days of the mission. However, the trader had died sometime before the missionaries reached Bethel, which left the missionaries with no one to help them communicate with the local people.<sup>41</sup> Despite this setback, John Kilbuck reported that the language learning proceeded well. He wrote to the Moravian headquarters in a June, 1886, letter that "we have learned a great many words, but words are not all we need in order to speak the language." He hoped that the next year would bring more rapid progress in language acquisition.<sup>42</sup>

By their second year in Bethel, the missionaries had opened the doors to their first schoolhouse. The school served a small number of boarders, but appeared to draw a lot of attention from local people, since Kilbuck stated that it was "not uncommon to have quite a room full of native visitors, children and adults." The initial schooling consisted of religious teachings. Kilbuck, through a translator, explained the story of Christ's birth and taught hymns.<sup>43</sup> However, some parents did not want to send their children to school because they believed that being near white people would cause the youth to die.<sup>44</sup> Possibly this fear was left over from earlier contentions that the Russians brought epidemic disease to the area. In Carmel, the missionary school began serving students in January, 1888.<sup>45</sup>

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40 Kilbuck, 70.

41 Henkelman, 90.

42 *Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen, August 26-27, 1886* (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Printing Office, 1886), 20.

43 Kilbuck, 120.

44 Oswalt, *Mission of Change*, 35.

45 Henkelman, 116.

The Carmel missionaries had an easier time establishing themselves. Wolff had traveled to Kanuluk, about three miles from the village of Nushagak, in 1886 to build the missionary home. Wolff relied on assistance from the Arctic Fishing Company, which provided two laborers and a carpenter to help the missionary. When the missionaries returned a year later, they already had a solid structure to occupy and could purchase needed goods from the Arctic Fishing Company or the Alaska Commercial Company's nearby trading post.<sup>46</sup> Letters and reports from the Carmel missionaries often detailed offers of support from employees of the Arctic Fishing Company and the Nushagak canneries.<sup>47</sup>

The missionary efforts to teach Christianity extended beyond the schoolhouse doors. John Kilbuck reported that some Eskimos began attending the Sunday services.<sup>48</sup> Kilbuck began traveling to visit natives in surrounding settlements in 1887. While Kilbuck knew he needed to travel to spread the religious message adequately, the Moravians were also happy to see more visitors to Bethel as word of the mission spread through the region. The first missionary trips were generally useful in becoming familiar with the native population, since the missionaries' language skills were still poor.<sup>49</sup> In order to extend the missionary message further, the Kilbucks enlisted Eskimo converts to preach the gospel in other villages, which sometimes heightened tensions between village members who belonged to the competing Moravian and Russian Orthodoxy churches.<sup>50</sup>

The Kilbucks and their fellow missionaries wanted complete conversion of the natives, which made them willing to move slowly in the conversion process. Also, the Moravians had a

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46 Ibid., 113-115.

47 *Proceedings of the One Hundred and Thirteenth General Meeting of the United Brethren for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen, held at Bethlehem, September 28, 1888* (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Publication Office, 1888), 83.

48 Kilbuck, 120.

49 Fienup-Riordan, *Real People*, 87.

50 Oswalt, *Bashful No Longer*, 88.



difficult time communicating their Christian intent in the first years of living at Bethel. According to John Kilbuck, they had to convince the Eskimos that the missionaries were not traders. He wrote, “Wherever the idea has been grasped, it was received with evident signs of appreciation; but the majority still believe that we are traders, and this in spite of our protestations to the contrary, and our absolutely refusing to buy their furs.”<sup>51</sup>

Even after convincing the Yup'ik people that they were missionaries, the Moravians had to confront Yup'ik conceptions of Christianity. Edith Kilbuck proclaimed that the Eskimos of Napaskiagamute were “so ignorant that they think baptizing makes them Christians no matter either who does it.” John Kilbuck wrote that a man came to the mission hoping to have his child baptized. Kilbuck complained that the “people here think that the only function of a priest are [sic] to give, by baptism Cossak [white] names to their children, and to administer the communion.” Kilbuck explained to the father “that at present we could not baptize his child, as we were unable to explain to him the meaning of the rite.” Although Kilbuck blamed the Russian Orthodox missionary for spreading wrong ideas about Christianity, the interest in receiving names from the white missionaries makes sense in the context of Yup'ik spirituality, since the Eskimos placed great importance on naming ceremonies. Even after the Yup'ik people began to understand the missionaries' reasons for moving to the area, the Moravians waited to start church services until the natives could understand the meaning of the religious ceremony. The missionaries did not accept their first official converts into the Church until three years after establishing the mission. John Kilbuck reported in a letter to de Schweinitz that nine applicants had asked to be received in the church the previous year, but were denied. However, after a year of faithful church attendance, Kilbuck saw “that their desire to follow Christ was sincere,

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51 Kilbuck, 99.

therefore I received them.” All converts had previously been members of the Russian Orthodox church.<sup>52</sup>

That the first Eskimos accepted into the Moravian mission church were formerly Russian Orthodox members is not surprising. Orthodox missionaries had introduced the possibility of new ideologies to the Yup'ik Eskimos, which paved the way for the Moravians to introduce their brand of Christianity.<sup>53</sup> However, the Moravians had a far greater impact than the Russians because they had more regular sustained contact with the Eskimos.<sup>54</sup> The Russian Orthodox missionaries had few numbers and limited financial support, which minimized their ability to influence daily life directly. Rather than relying on the Russian Orthodox method of employing a solitary missionary who traveled across a huge region, the Moravians, with their strong financial support from Pennsylvania, had several missionaries at each mission. By 1893 there were seven missionaries stationed in Bethel.<sup>55</sup> Also, unlike the Russian Orthodox missionaries, the Moravians devoted considerable energy to modifying the Yup'ik lifestyle.

The goal of Moravian missionaries was not only to Christianize natives, but also to “civilize” them. In his early interactions with the Yup'ik people, John Kilbuck expressed the belief that the Eskimos “can be taught and trained very readily to something higher than their present mode of living.” The Kilbucks often judged the Yup'ik culture harshly and worked hard to effect change in traditional beliefs over the two decades of their service in Bethel. The missionaries were vocal in their condemnation of indigenous practices, which led to resistance among many Eskimos in the early years of their proselytizing.<sup>56</sup> The missionaries believed that traditional practices such as infanticide, ritual execution, and abandonment of the old and sick

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 123, 133, 325.

<sup>53</sup> Fienup-Riordan, *Real People*, 49.

<sup>54</sup> Oswalt, *Bashful No Longer*, 90.

<sup>55</sup> Kilbuck, 256.

<sup>56</sup> Kilbuck, 72, 86.

were based on “superstitions” and were evidence of the lower stage of Eskimo spiritual development.<sup>57</sup>

Over the decades of Moravian influence in the area Eskimos abandoned many traditional social and cultural practices. Converts had to give up their easy attitudes towards premarital and extramarital sex, plural marriages, and divorce. Many Yup'ik people felt forced to marry partners, which “no doubt produced many permanent but unhappy marriages,” observed Oswalt. In the twentieth century, men, who traditionally maintained a separate residence, often moved into the houses of their wives. Oswalt argues that “for wives to live with their husbands throughout the year destroyed not only the male bonds represented by qasiq [*qasgiq*] life but the closeness of related females in the households.” Socially, by the mid-twentieth century, village life no longer centered around the men's houses, which also led to declines in the traditional storytelling and aboriginal ceremonies that were once practiced within the men's houses. Eskimos often replaced these activities with white-influenced activities including card playing and social dancing, much to the horror of missionaries.<sup>58</sup> The Moravians also spoke out against the use of tobacco, a well-loved habit of many Eskimos since the early years of European trade.<sup>59</sup>

The missionaries prohibited work on Sundays, which forced Moravian Eskimos to modify important subsistence activities, especially salmon fishing. When men fished on Saturdays, their wives could not process the fish on Sundays, and the men could not fish on Sundays either, so they lost two days of food production a week. Another economic change brought by Moravian Christianity was that motivations for gathering surplus foods diminished when Eskimos stopped practicing traditional winter ceremonies, which had revolved around

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57 Fienup-Riordan, *Real People*, 118.

58 Oswalt, *Bashful No Longer*, 90, 125, 128.

59 *Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen for the Year Ending August 25, 1904* (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Publication Office, 1904), 76.

accumulating foods to serve during the ceremonies.<sup>60</sup>

While the Moravian missionaries overcame early obstacles, and by the twentieth century molded much of Yup'ik life to fit their Christian ideals, they faced challenges from several fronts. The Russian Orthodox Church proved a hindrance to their early efforts to establish positive relationships with the Yup'ik people. Zakharii Bel'kov succeeded Father Netsvetov as the primary missionary in western Alaska.<sup>61</sup> Various writings indicate that the Moravian and Russian Orthodox missionaries engaged in fierce competition for the Yup'ik Eskimos' souls. Kilbuck even refers to the Russian Orthodox church as “the enemy” in one 1897 journal entry.<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately, no writings are available from the Orthodox missionary. No doubt his views on the situation were quite different from those of the Moravians. According to John Kilbuck, Bel'kov spread rumors among the natives that the American missionaries had come to enlist their sons as soldiers. He also “attacked our preaching-- and aroused a great opposition among his people against us.”

Edith Kilbuck described a visit from the Russian priest in 1889. After dining with the American missionaries, the priest proceeded to baptize a number of native people living in Bethel. John Kilbuck expressed outrage at the Russian missionary's actions. He wrote, “he endeavored to poison the minds of the people against us, and to this end he manfully plied his wily tongue” by frightening the Eskimos into believing that the Moravian missionaries would “bring them into utter darkness.” According to Kilbuck, the Russian also claimed that the Americans were now coming to the Yukon-Kuskokwim area in such great numbers that the whole region would soon belong to the white man. The priest's words, while designed to scare the Eskimos, were also prophetic. In the following years, the Russian priest still worked to

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60 Oswalt, *Bashful No Longer*, 91.

61 Ann Fienup-Riordan, Appendix III in *The Yup'ik Eskimos: As Described in the Travel Journals and Ethnographic Accounts of John and Edith Kilbuck who served with the Alaska Mission of the Moravian Church, 1886-1900*, ed. Ann Fienup-Riordan (Kingston, Ontario: The Limestone Press, 1988), 511.

62 Kilbuck, 412.

convert natives up and down the river.<sup>63</sup>

The Carmel mission, located near a firmly-established Russian Orthodox missionary, encountered even more problems. J. Taylor Hamilton, who toured the missions of Alaska in 1905, reported to the Moravian Church headquarters that, “One of the chief hindrances to the work lies in the propinquity of the Greek Church and priest at Nushagak, with its chapel at New Kanarrnak, the largest village across the river... Discipline, in the sense in which an evangelical church employs that term, is nil.”<sup>64</sup> F.E. Wolff declared, “Our Mission work must necessarily go very slowly, and I fear it will be years before we will see any great spiritual results amongst the natives right here, as we are now entirely on the Greek priest's domain, and he fills his people with fear and prejudice against us.” Mary Wolff noted that the Greek priest forbade his congregation to attend a funeral service of a local Nushagak woman because the service was held at the Moravian church. In an 1889 letter, missionary John Schoechert wrote, “we are in great hope about getting scholars, and keeping the school, although we have very great opposition in the Greek Church, the priest, and almost every one at Nushagak.”<sup>65</sup>

Animosity between Russian Orthodox and Moravian missionaries extended beyond the boundaries of western Alaska. Historically, the Russian Orthodox Church and the Moravian Church had an unhappy relationship. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Moravians had re-settled in Russia at the invitation of Catherine the Great. Originally promised land and religious freedom in their new home, the Moravians were perceived as a threat by the Orthodox hierarchy and summarily persecuted. Theological issues divided the Moravian Church from the Russian Orthodox Church as well. The Moravians believed that individuals enjoyed

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63 Kilbuck, 72, 156, 324, 486, note 198.

64 *Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen for the Year Ending August 24, 1905* (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Publication Office, 1905), 92.

65 *Proceedings of the One Hundred and Fourteenth General Meeting of the Society of the United Brethren for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen* (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Publication Office, 1889), 75, 92, 95.

direct relationships with God, and must transform their lives to “reflect the Christian love and charity at its core.” Church membership was secondary to this personal relationship.<sup>66</sup>

Practitioners of Russian Orthodoxy demonstrated their belief that each person contained the potential of divinity within himself or herself by using symbols that expressed their faith in daily life, through observing specific rituals, and by participating in laymen services on feast days.<sup>67</sup>

The two Churches fundamentally disagreed about how a person became Christian. To the Orthodox, conversion was a gradual and continuous process and so missionaries tolerated some traditional activities because they knew such practices would eventually fall out of favor among natives. The Moravians believed that conversion was a complete and often sudden event. They especially disliked the Orthodox toleration of shamans.<sup>68</sup>

While the Russian Orthodox missionaries appeared as obstacles for the Moravian missionaries, the Moravians most powerful opponents were the shamans, whose influence over the people had remained steady throughout the Russian period. John Kilbuck identified local shamans as a major hindrance to early mission goals. Kilbuck and the other missionaries associated shamans with superstition and believed that the shamans actively tried to encourage resistance to their Christian message. He wrote that the missionaries “openly attacked the shamans, and made a determined effort to discredit them before the people. Here is where we differed from the Greek church – The priest did not approve of shamaning but he was so weak on this point—that the people said that they could be good Greeks and still practice shamanism.” Kilbuck noted that as people became interested in the missionaries' message the shamans responded with bitter opposition. Some even “openly avowed that they would yet break the influence of the missionary.” When speaking of two nearby villages, Kilbuck blamed the

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66 Fienup-Riordan, *Real People*, 133, 135.

67 Black, 225; Dauenhauer, 34.

68 Fienup-Riordan, *Real People*, 136, 139.

shamans for preventing the missionary message from reaching the people. A shaman in Napaskiak argued that the people should not believe the missionaries' promises and claimed that these whites were “the children of thunder” and were therefore not really human.<sup>69</sup>

The Kilbucks saw the destruction of traditional beliefs as a crucial part of the conversion experience. John Kilbuck argued that “to tear down their old superstitions and beliefs prepares them to accept the Gospel.” At several villages about twenty-five miles from the mission, John worried that “we make little impression upon them. Not only are they downright heathen, but they are very low heathen, too.” He then stated that “Among those people and among the people at the mouth of the river, shamanism has a strong hold upon the people. It will be a long time before we can hope to gain one soul from these.” Kilbuck equated superstition with gullibility. He blamed Yup'ik superstitions for allowing the Russian Orthodox Church and the shamans to maintain influence over some Eskimos. In 1896 he wrote, “That this village as a body flocked to the Grk [Greek] priest is not a matter of surprise for any of us who have learned to know them, for they are as unstable as water. They are exceedingly superstitious above all people, and most any one can scare them into doing most any thing, be he priest or shaman.”<sup>70</sup> In their attempts to overcome Eskimo “heathenism,” the missionaries also worked to stop the practice of some ceremonies and replace them with traditional Christian and American celebrations, such as Thanksgiving and Christmas.<sup>71</sup> In his 1890 yearly report on the state of the Bethel mission, Kilbuck wrote, “For the first time in the history of the Kuskokwim people, the masquerade [winter ceremony] did not take place in our village.” The people “put away their masks, by burning them, and with some exceptions declared for Christ.”<sup>72</sup>

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69 Ibid., 72, 73, 80, 177.

70 Ibid., 178, 324, 338.

71 Oswalt, *Bashful*, 86.

72 Kilbuck, 174.

The missionaries' successes were tempered by many challenges. Kilbuck described one particular clash with a “celebrated and much dreaded” shaman. Kilbuck rebuked the man publicly for the unchristian act of taking a second wife. The two met soon after at the bedside of a sick person. The shaman was already attending to the illness when the missionary arrived. Kilbuck wrote that, “An attempt was made to keep the missionary from entering the hut where the sick one lay-- but as he had been called-- he just went in.--” Soon after the shaman became ill and the ministering of fellow shamans did nothing to help him. Finally the sick shaman came to the mission for help and soon recovered. He then declared that he would move far away from the interfering missionaries and threatened to “shaman” Kilbuck so that people would distrust the Moravian. Kilbuck went away on a long trip and people began to wonder if the shaman had killed him. However, when the missionary returned unharmed, the shaman retreated to some other village. Kilbuck happily reported that, “Altho this shaman never relented-- his case served to bring the people nearer to the missionary... and the shamans in consequence lost their influence rapidly.”<sup>73</sup>

Although Kilbuck expressed optimism at the declining powers of the shamans, the people still regularly relied on shamans to heal sickness, much to the missionaries' chagrin. In 1889, Kilbuck reported that Eskimos near the Kuskokwim mouth “tenaciously cling to their 'shamans,' and firmly believe in them.” He also noted that the Eskimos usually came to the missionaries for medical advice after consulting the shamans. “The shamans are reaping quite a harvest, in these days, while la Grippe [influenza] is prevalent. For this reason-- the people in the village, are slacking off in their interest in God's word,” wrote Kilbuck in an 1898 letter to his wife. Two years later, Kilbuck reported that, “Down the river the people are willing to accept the Word, but

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73 Ibid., 73, 157.



are unwilling to give up their old ways. They would like to take both, and thus be sure of heaven...The people listen out of respect to me, but my preaching is nothing to them. They say our religion will do well enough for the white men, but not for them.” Even when people expressed interest in Christianity, they were not necessarily ready to let go of the traditions that had served them well for generations. That shamans still retained influence over the Yup'ik people is demonstrated in another telling incident. In his travels of August, 1890, John Kilbuck met a family whose son had just perished from “le grippe.” After presiding over a Christian funeral service, Kilbuck witnessed the dead boy's father accuse another man of killing his son by shamanism as retaliation for a tangled love triangle.<sup>74</sup>

While shamanism did not lose influence in most areas of the Yukon-Kuskokwim region, the missionaries' healing efforts did win them the trust of many Eskimos. According to Oswalt, “Healing the ill was still largely a mystical process among the Eskimos, and they were willing to try the techniques of the missionaries.”<sup>75</sup> Medical care proved to be a powerful way to counter the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church, and may have encouraged some to turn away from the shamans. John Kilbuck reported that “the use of medicine was a great help in winning the people to the Gospel.” In one instance, Kilbuck described conversing with a man who told the missionary that he “was really indifferent to your Gospel message, and in time I really opposed it.” According to Kilbuck, the man went on to say, “But I watched your practice of medicine. I noticed that when you said that the medicine would do so and so-- that you spoke the truth. The medicine always did what you claimed for it. I began to think-- that what you said about the new life was also true. Now I believe it is true.” In his 1888 report to the Moravian headquarters in Pennsylvania, Kilbuck noted that people often came to the mission to receive medicines from the

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 158, 172, 189-190, 424.

<sup>75</sup> Oswalt, *Mission of Change*, 34.

missionaries. In her diary of August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1891, Edith Kilbuck recorded, “All this forenoon I have been giving out medicine. I gave to eight different persons several kinds of medicine each, mostly castor oil, arnica and ammonia and salve for boils.”<sup>76</sup>

While the missionaries offered a variety of medicines to sick visitors, they could not always provide an effective cure. The fall of 1893 saw an outbreak of influenza at the mission. Edith Kilbuck expressed despair in her journal entry, “We must often grieve that we can do so little. There are several very sick persons under our care at present. We do for them all we can and still they linger on and suffer. It is pitiful to witness.”<sup>77</sup> The Carmel missionaries also dispensed medicines to local natives. Wolff wrote that the Eskimos “constantly come to us with their ailments and want us to keep them.” Letters and diaries written by the Carmel missionaries often detailed attempts at curing local natives.<sup>78</sup> Despite the helpfulness of Western medicine for many sicknesses, the Yup'ik people usually visited the missionaries to cure illness as a last resort in the early years of the Bethel and Carmel missions.<sup>79</sup> The acceptance of missionary medicine did not indicate a decline in the importance of the shamans as healers. Early in his missionary service, Dr. Henry Romig observed that the “shaman's hold on his people was almost uncanny.”<sup>80</sup>

The shamans still displayed healing powers to the Eskimos. However, their primary functions may have been slowly evolving as missionaries began to heal people of common complaints. The shamans still probably provided psychological consultations. The Yup'ik people believed that when a person talked about problems then he or she would avoid harming the mind and also prevent illness from entering the body. Often, the discussion of problems or strong emotions took place publicly in the *qasgiq*. If needed, the shaman would guide people through

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76 Kilbuck, 80, 158, 206.

77 Kilbuck, 236.

78 *Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren*, 1889, 85, 90-91.

79 Oswalt, *Mission of Change*, 34.

80 Eva Greenslit Anderson, *Dog-Team Doctor* (Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, 1940), 76.

the process of talking about their feelings. The language barrier, especially in the early years, likely prevented the missionaries from fulfilling a function of counselor to their congregation, which would allow the shamans to continue caring for the psychological needs of their communities. Although there is no specific evidence to support this contention, the shamans may have also been consulted on cases where the missionary medicine could not provide relief.

The missionaries knew that the ability to cure minor illness helped them gain the trust of the Eskimos, despite the shamans' admonitions against interacting with the white people. Their efforts were greatly assisted by the arrival of medical personnel in the 1890s. In 1893, Philippine King, a trained nurse, arrived in Bethel. She served at Ougavig, the second missionary post to be established on the Kuskokwim River in 1892. After King was transferred to Carmel in 1896, Dr. Hermon Romig, brother to Edith Kilbuck, joined the Bethel mission community with his wife, Ella Ervin Romig. The newly-arrived missionary was the first medical doctor to serve the Moravian Church in Alaska.<sup>81</sup> John Kilbuck felt optimistic about Dr. Romig's influence on the Eskimos. He wrote in September, 1897 that "the Doctor's success is fast growing into a confidence, down this way, in medicine, and soon the shamans will be forced to take a back seat."<sup>82</sup> Word of the doctor's abilities spread quickly and soon people came from as far away as 300 to 400 miles to seek medical treatment at the Bethel mission. Romig was traveling along the coast when one particular group of distant Indians arrived, and they waited six weeks to see the doctor.<sup>83</sup> However, some Eskimos were still hesitant about missionary doctoring. Romig reported in 1898 that an Eskimo man wanted payment before the doctor would be allowed to operate on him.<sup>84</sup> When the Romigs left Alaska seven years later, the Eskimos were forced to rely either on

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81 Henkelman, 65.

82 Kilbuck, 400.

83 United States Office of Education, *Report of the Commissioner of Education for the Year 1898-1899*, vol. 2 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), 1394.

84 Kilbuck, 487, footnote 203.

the missionaries or the shamans for medical care. However, many had already returned to the shamans after the terrible summer of 1900.

### **The Great Sickness**

Faith in Dr. Romig's curing abilities and the missionaries' religion would be severely tested during the double epidemic of influenza and measles that ravaged western Alaska in 1900. As in the smallpox epidemic that occurred a few decades before, massive numbers of Eskimos in the Yukon-Kuskokwim region perished. Unlike the smallpox epidemic, there were numerous witnesses, including several medical personnel, who provide harrowing accounts of their experiences during the summer of 1900. The missionaries could do little to help the suffering Eskimos, and some white people became ill themselves. The Yup'ik people, so skilled in recovering from crisis situations, would rebound after the epidemic. However, the inability of Dr. Romig to assist the Yup'ik people who relied on him would have serious and long-term consequences for Moravian efforts in the region.

The Eskimos of western Alaska had experienced regular bouts of illness in the years after the smallpox epidemic. Father Netsvetov recorded numerous outbreaks of respiratory diseases like whooping cough in his journals of the 1840s and 1850s. As more outsiders came to the Yukon-Kuskokwim region, the Eskimos were exposed to many sicknesses. On St. Lawrence Island between 1878 through 1880, some epidemic disease struck the population and, with a concurrent famine, left up to two-thirds of the people dead.<sup>85</sup> The Moravian missionaries recorded regular outbreaks of illness in Bethel and the surrounding region in the late 1880s,

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<sup>85</sup> Aron L. Crowell and Estelle Oozevaseuk, "The St. Lawrence Island Famine and Epidemic, 1878-80: A Yupik Narrative in Cultural and Historical Context" *Arctic Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (2006): 1.

including pneumonia.<sup>86</sup> In 1889, pneumonia or some similar illness struck Nushagak.<sup>87</sup> In the summer and fall of 1890 influenza gripped the Kuskokwim region and caused many fatalities. Kilbuck reported that an epidemic of some unknown illness killed people in Togiak and caused survivors to scatter.<sup>88</sup> Numerous children died from whooping cough in 1896.<sup>89</sup> Influenza returned in 1895, 1896, and 1897.<sup>90</sup> While these outbreaks of disease caused some deaths and plenty of discomfort, the situation in 1900 was far different. Up to half the Yup'ik Eskimos living in western Alaska may have perished in the months-long epidemics, which the Eskimos called the “Great Sickness.”<sup>91</sup> A host of factors combined that summer to create “a cataclysm of mass death.”<sup>92</sup>

By 1900, the Yup'ik Eskimos were well-acquainted with influenza. The influenza virus, also known as the flu, is spread by inhaling virus-laden droplets from an infected person. Symptoms include everything that we generally associate with the flu: sore throat, cough, runny nose, fever, chills, headache, and generalized pain. Usually influenza is not life-threatening except to the very young, the elderly, and those whose immune systems are already depressed. The origins of influenza are unknown, and the illness does not appear in the historical record of Europe until the fifteenth century. Since that time, influenza has been a constant companion to humans, spreading to the Americas with the arrival of Europeans and causing widespread devastation. Historian Alfred W. Crosby calls influenza pandemics “among the most vast and

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86 Robert Fortune, *Chills and Fever: Health and Disease in the Early History of Alaska* (Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 1992), 212.

87 Hugh Cecil Lowther, *A Victorian Earl in the Arctic: The Travels and Collections of the Fifth Earl of Lonsdale*, ed. Shepard Krech III (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1989), 82.

88 Kilbuck, 181, 186, 189, 194, 197.

89 Schwalbe, 72.

90 Wolfe, 212; Kilbuck, 355-357.

91 Wolfe, 91.

92 Harold Napoleon, *Yuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being*, ed. Eric Madsen (Fairbanks, AK: Alaska Native Knowledge Network, 1996), 10.

awesome of all earthly phenomena.”<sup>93</sup>

Father Netsvetov's journals indicate that the Yup'ik people experienced a measles outbreak about fifty years prior to the “Great Sickness.” However, few people were probably still alive who had survived a measles infection, which provided lifelong immunity. In 1900, most Eskimos succumbed to the sickness, which indicates that they had not been exposed to the virus. Measles is borne by a virus and spread through airborne droplets. Infection can also occur through direct contact and by touching contaminated articles. The incubation rate ranges from eight to thirteen days before the telltale rash appears, along with symptoms of fever, cough, and conjunctivitis. Pneumonia can be a complication from measles. Because measles is often confused with smallpox in the historical literature, the date of appearance is unknown. Like so many other Old World diseases, measles accompanied the Europeans to the Americas. With no immunity to measles, Native Americans fell quickly. Often, complications from measles, including a lack of care, lack of treatment for complications, and poor nutrition, rather than the illness itself, leads to death.<sup>94</sup>

The sources of the two illnesses that defined western Alaska's double epidemic are uncertain. Ships spiriting gold-seekers to Nome are one potential origin of the measles epidemic. However, some contemporary observers believed that Eskimos visiting Siberia to trade brought the diseases home with them. There is some validity to that claim, since the earliest cases of measles appeared around the Bering Strait region, where people would likely cross from Siberia. Chukchi Eskimos in Siberia were stricken by measles in spring 1900. By the late summer, measles had spread down the western Alaska coast to the Aleutian Islands. Incredibly, influenza

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93 Alfred W. Crosby, “Influenza,” in *The Cambridge World History of Human Disease*, ed. Kenneth F. Kiple, 807-811 (Cambridge, England: University of Cambridge Press, 1993), 807-809.

94 Robert J. Kim-Farley, “Measles,” in *The Cambridge World History of Human Disease*, ed. Kenneth F. Kiple, 871-875 (Cambridge, England: University of Cambridge Press, 1993), 871-874.

hit around the same time, likely carried north by trading vessels. When the diseases struck western Alaska in the early summer months, most Yup'ik families had already scattered across the region to their small summer fishing camps, but relative isolation did not prevent the sicknesses from spreading rapidly and causing widespread calamity.<sup>95</sup>

James T. White, surgeon on the U.S. Steamer *Nunivak*, witnessed the early summer arrival of influenza at St. Michael. Measles appeared in early July. By the middle of July, White wrote that “reports were brought in of great destitution, sickness, and death among the natives of the surrounding country.” He commented that stories from visitors to St. Lawrence Island indicated that “the natives were dying so fast, and so many of the remaining were sick, that the dead were left where they lay or simply removed out of doors, out of the way, and there left to the mercies of the dogs.” White also recorded smallpox arriving in late June, 1900, on two American vessels bound for Nome. The boats were quarantined, but smallpox soon struck Nome. He feared that if smallpox had “become established on the river, with the then existing complications of measles and influenza, it would have swept the Yukon Valley like wildfire...”<sup>96</sup>

While the smallpox virus quickly burned out, likely in great part due to White's efforts at quarantining the infected, the cluster of diseases that struck the region all at once contributed to a high death rate. Devastating illnesses like pneumonia, pulmonary tuberculosis, and dysentery hit many people already weakened by influenza or measles.<sup>97</sup> Romig also noted the presence of whooping cough in some areas. Unusual weather may have encouraged certain illnesses to settle among the invalids. A “cold and misty” rain fell over the region for much of the summer, which flooded peoples' homes and likely contributed to their ill health. According to Dr. Romig, people

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<sup>95</sup> Wolfe, 96, 109.

<sup>96</sup> James T. White, “Report of the Medical Officer U.S. Steamer *Nunivak*,” in *Report of the Operations of the U.S. Revenue Steamer Nunivak*, by John C. Cantwell, 257-274 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902), 257-260.

<sup>97</sup> Wolfe, 109.

contracted colds from the damp weather, which often turned into pneumonia. He believed that pneumonia was the true cause of death for many Eskimos.<sup>98</sup> Concurrent diseases also caused severe hardship on St. Lawrence Island. Measles visited the island at the end of May. As people began to recover from the severe, but not generally life-threatening, illness, influenza struck, which knocked down the already weakened population.<sup>99</sup> Then, in mid-August, some people began to exhibit acute tuberculosis, which resulted in a high mortality rate.<sup>100</sup>

Other factors contributed to the phenomenal death rates that accompanied the 1900 epidemics. The Yup'ik people commonly fled the scene of illness or death, which helped spread the diseases to extended family members at other camps. Upon reaching the inland village of Petkas Point, White wrote that the Eskimos had retreated from the coast to escape the epidemics, but were now all ill. In another village further up the Yukon River, White learned that most people had fled after the shamans warned them to leave the area before they all died.<sup>101</sup>

The temporary social and economic breakdown that accompanied the epidemics no doubt increased the mortality rates. White cruised up the Yukon River with the *Nunivak* in mid-August. Over the course of his travels, White stopped at twenty villages and attended 245 sick people, both native and white. He noted that surviving Eskimos reported starvation conditions since they had lain sick and could not procure food for much of the summer. Many said they were still suffering from either influenza or measles. In one tent, White discovered an ill man laying next to a body that had been dead for several days. He quickly ordered some boys to bury the body. White and the crew could do little for the sick Eskimos except leave food and medicine at each desperate village. Just upriver from Ikogmiut, White observed that the Yup'ik people still alive

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98 *Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren for Propagating the Gospel Among the Heathen for the Year Ending November 14, 1900* (Bethlehem, PA: Moravian Publication Office, 1900), 27, 33.

99 Wolfe, 105.

100 Churchill, 92.

101 White, 262, 267.



“claimed to be too sick to move about and attend to their own wants, but this inability to work was not alone due to sickness, but also to discouragement, a giving up, a generally demoralized condition.” Few dead bodies were buried at the villages White passed, and even then most graves were shallow enough for the dogs to dig up the dead. He saw a human foot on one beach and various pieces of bodies strewn along hillsides.<sup>102</sup> With no one willing or able to care for the sick, many probably died of dehydration or starvation. Romig noted that along the Kuskokwim River, “There were not enough well ones to care for the sick, and in many cases the sick were in serious need of care.”<sup>103</sup>

Romig traveled from village to village along the Kuskokwim River to check on the ill and dying Eskimos. He also reported a general air of despair among survivors. Romig encountered large piles of bodies stacked in homes.<sup>104</sup> He wrote, “The dead often remained for days in the same tent with the living, and in many cases they were never removed... At one place some passing strangers heard the crying of children, and upon examination found only some children left with both parents dead in the tent.” After reaching Quegaluk, Romig found only one man barely left alive, who happened to be a member of the Moravian congregation. The man died in Romig's presence, lying next to his wife and infant son who had died earlier in the morning.<sup>105</sup>

John Kilbuck also witnessed the effects of the epidemics on the Yup'ik natives while collecting data for the 1900 census. A typical journal entry reads: “Take Census, bury one man. Move on a few miles.” Kilbuck seemed to dread his census-taking task, since the work meant visiting settlements and recording deaths of many people he knew. “Going down I have no doubt

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 261-263, 265, 266, 271.

<sup>103</sup>*Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren, 1900*, 26-27.

<sup>104</sup>Anderson, 194.

<sup>105</sup>*Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren, 1901*, 26-27.

I must record other deaths. Oh! But it is something dreadful, the way the epidemic mowed down the people,” he wrote. “The measles were out while I was gone up the river and depopulated the country. This summer there were 57 deaths in Bethel alone. I believe the deaths from here up, will soon number 250! Nearly all our loved ones are gone...”<sup>106</sup>

As in past epidemics, estimating a precise mortality rate is difficult because no accurate population counts existed for the entire region. Church records give some indication of the number dead. In 1899, the combined Bethel, Ugavig and Carmel missions reported 20 deaths out of their 987-member congregation.<sup>107</sup> The next year a startling 283 deaths were reported.<sup>108</sup> The epidemics impacted communities differently. The presence of whites, who were less affected by the epidemic diseases and could therefore provide crucial medical care, helped lower death rates in some villages.<sup>109</sup> Very few whites became ill or died during the epidemics. A few crew members of the *Nunivak* became mildly ill.<sup>110</sup> Moravian missionary families at Carmel and Bethel contracted influenza and measles but there were few deaths. In contrast, Carmel missionaries Mary Huber and Emma Rock reported that in surrounding villages at least one-third to one-half of the native people died.<sup>111</sup> Several contemporaries estimated that at least half of the Eskimos on the Kuskokwim perished in the epidemic.<sup>112</sup>

While the population losses were devastating, the Yup'ik people made a swift and remarkable recovery. When measles and influenza arrived in western Alaska, most family food stores were at the lowest level of the season. The epidemics interrupted normal salmon harvesting

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<sup>106</sup>Kilbuck, 438-440, 442.

<sup>107</sup>*Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren*, 1900, 36.

<sup>108</sup>*Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren*, 1901, 24.

<sup>109</sup>Wolfe, 116.

<sup>110</sup>White, 259-260.

<sup>111</sup>*Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren*, 1901, 26, 38, 40, 54.

<sup>112</sup>Anderson, 198; G.T. Emmons, “A Report on the Condition and Needs of the Natives of Alaska,” 58<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, Senate Document No. 106 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1905), 7; *Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren*, 1901, 29. However, Wolfe supports the estimate that one quarter of the Yup'ik Eskimos died. See Wolfe, 115.

patterns, which prevented the Yup'ik people from replenishing their much-diminished food supplies with fresh and dried salmon.<sup>113</sup> While visiting a small fishing camp at Kwikpak Crossing, White reported that “their story was the same as that told by the natives at St. Michael. They had all been too sick to fish and they were now without food.”<sup>114</sup> Because the Eskimos had missed out on crucial harvesting during the summer months, many whites in the area assumed that there would be widespread starvation in the winter of 1900. The Department of the Army, Treasury Department, and the missions worked together to provide food supplies at aid stations along the Yukon River, across Norton Sound, and along the Seward Peninsula.<sup>115</sup> However, as they did after the earlier smallpox epidemic, the Yup'ik Eskimos regrouped and were able to harvest secondary food resources, such as whitefish, burbot, blackfish and hare. While traveling back down the Yukon the following spring, White wrote that “the conditions of the natives this spring, however, were very encouraging and there was every prospect of a good and profitable season ahead of them.”<sup>116</sup> A few years later, J. Taylor Hamilton toured the region's missions and reported that the Kuskokwim “Eskimos show a slow but steady increase in numbers since the great epidemic of 1900, which swept all northern Alaska, spent its effects. Here the birth-rate exceeds the death-rate.”<sup>117</sup>

Of course, the Yup'ik people did not simply return to their pre-epidemic life. The steep population losses would have led to inevitable shifts in social organization. The deaths of elder leaders, who normally presided over village-wide decisions and provided social stability to the Eskimos, would have left leadership voids in many communities. Oswalt argues that the traditional means of social control weakened when successive leaders died during the 1900

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113Wolfe, 109, 111.

114White, 261.

115Wolfe, 115.

116White, 274.

117*Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren, 1905, 89.*

epidemics, paving the way for American political institutions to enter village affairs.<sup>118</sup> The loss of elders would have also meant a decline in tribal knowledge, since the older people held the stories and skills of previous generations. Surviving young people often could not continue traditional ceremonies because they did not know how to conduct them, so some traditions lost their importance as people adapted to new social and economic conditions of 20<sup>th</sup> century Alaska. The skills needed to craft traditional artifacts were sometimes lost with the deaths of elders.<sup>119</sup> Also, given the overall mortality rates, many shamans probably died in the epidemic, which would have hampered the apprenticeship system of teaching young people the knowledge required to become shamans.

The Yup'ik people shifted their populations to accommodate the loss of family members, demonstrating a reliance on the same coping mechanisms that carried them through the smallpox epidemic. The traditional admonition to be generous towards elders and orphans likely helped people in these categories be assimilated into family groups.<sup>120</sup> Some large villages were abandoned by survivors. Ivan Ishnook told anthropologist James VanStone that his family was the last to leave the village of Tikchik, where the population had been almost completely wiped out in 1900. Ishnook's father wanted to stay in the family home, but the other members were “lonely and did not want to remain where there had been so much sickness and death.”<sup>121</sup> The Bethel missionaries noted that as families shrank from the epidemics they often joined new family groupings. Also, missionaries who traveled in western Alaska in the year after the “Great Sickness” saw many villages that were abandoned or had only a few people left.<sup>122</sup> Three decades

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<sup>118</sup>Oswalt, *Bashful No Longer*, 163.

<sup>119</sup>*Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>120</sup>Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Wise Words of the Yup'ik People: We Talk to You Because We Love You* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 45.

<sup>121</sup>James W. VanStone, *Tikchik Village: A Nineteenth Century Riverine Community in Southwestern Alaska* 56, no. 3 *Fieldiana: Anthropology* (Chicago, IL: Field Museum Press, 1968), 229-230.

<sup>122</sup>*Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren, 1901*, 30, 32.

later, anthropologist Aleš Hrdlička reported many abandoned villages in his travels through the region.<sup>123</sup>

The Eskimos recovered quickly due to their built-in social strategies for managing disaster. However, they still needed to interpret the epidemic and its devastating consequences. There were no Russians to accuse of importing the diseases. Among the primary sources, there are few references to how the Yup'ik people interpreted the “Great Sickness.” Some natives around St. Michael blamed “the unusually dry and warm season.”<sup>124</sup> Others accused the census-takers, who included Romig and Kilbuck, for spreading the epidemic.<sup>125</sup> Romig reported that the Eskimos of Quinhagamiut blamed a trader for importing the sickness.<sup>126</sup> There does not appear to be any widespread backlash against the missionaries or traders, however, as there was when the Russians brought smallpox to the region.

Crucial insight into understanding the Yup'ik response to the “Great Sickness” lies not in who they accused of bringing the diseases, but in who they blamed for not curing them: Dr. Romig. Over the short time that Romig had lived in Bethel, the Eskimos had come to rely upon his medicines for relief. Many Yup'ik people blamed Romig for not curing them during the double epidemic. Scores of Eskimos traveled to the Bethel mission for help during the epidemic, but there was little that Romig could do.<sup>127</sup> Others had requested the doctor visit their villages because they could not travel, but Romig was not able to fulfill all requests.<sup>128</sup>

That many blamed Romig for his inability to cure the epidemics is evident in a series of

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<sup>123</sup>Aleš Hrdlička, *Anthropological Survey in Alaska, Extract from the Forty-Sixth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1930), 69, 134, 362.

<sup>124</sup>White, 260.

<sup>125</sup>Anna Buxbaum Schwalbe, *Dayspring on the Kuskokwim*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Bethlehem, PA: Department of Publications, 1985), 60; *Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren*, 1901, 26.

<sup>126</sup>*Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren*, 1901, 29.

<sup>127</sup>Anderson, 196.

<sup>128</sup>*Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren*, 1901, 33.

interactions with the Yup'ik people soon after the epidemic passed. A group of shamans confronted the doctor at Bethel and asked why he was withholding medicines from the Eskimos. More shamans appeared at the Bethel mission soon after and also threatened the doctor. Several days later, when traveling up the river, Romig felt that the natives were very hostile.<sup>129</sup> The Quinhagamiut Eskimos told Romig that he had “failed to cure them. Sending them the wrong kind of medicine. They even threatened to burn the houses erected by the Mission there.”<sup>130</sup> Romig and the other missionaries had promised that their medicines were superior to the “superstitions” of the Eskimos. Yet, when the Yup'ik people needed their doctor the most, he failed to deliver them from death and suffering. The shamans no doubt represented the vocal front of a widespread disillusionment with Western medicine and the missionaries.

Interestingly, the shamans acted as the voice of the survivors by directly confronting the missionary. Verbal confrontations were not generally encouraged by the Eskimos, who believed that restraint was a desirable character trait. While people inevitably felt angry, Yup'ik culture discouraged the emotional expression of anger. The Yup'ik people believed that showing anger could result in harm to a person's mind. Yup'ik elder Wassilie Evan stated that “If you argue and take revenge, you are stirring up something that you will regret.”<sup>131</sup> While we only have Romig's account of his interactions with the shamans, the tone of the exchange seems quite emotionally-charged. The shamans' decision to express their anger verbally is curious in the context of Yup'ik culture. The most important aspect of the confrontations between the shamans and Romig is the fact that the shamans were chosen to speak on behalf of the people. Romig's concern over feelings of hostility and his descriptions of the Eskimos accusations at Quinhagamiut indicate that the shamans were not alone in their resentment of the missionary's impotence.

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<sup>129</sup>Anderson, 198-201, 203.

<sup>130</sup>*Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren, 1901*, 29.

<sup>131</sup>Fienup-Riordan, *Wise Words*, 51.

Since Romig did not provide helpful medicine, the Eskimos turned to their shamans during the “Great Sickness.” While attending to the sick people along the Yukon River, White noted that, “Treating natives medicinally is most unsatisfactory in many respects,” due in part to communication difficulties, but primarily to the strong influence of the shamans over medical care of the sick Eskimos.<sup>132</sup> One shaman near Bethel ordered the people to throw dead bodies in the river, another hung a dead body from the *qasgiq* roof.<sup>133</sup> At Quinhagamiut, Kilbuck reported that the peoples’ “distress was great and their medicine insufficient. Many of the members and the opposing heathen medicine-men made all the trouble they could” during the epidemics.<sup>134</sup>

The shamans were able to maintain their healing influence over the people despite an inability to cure the epidemic diseases. Again, the reasons may lie in previously stated postulations concerning Yup’ik conceptions of disease cause and cure, as well as the role of shamans in Yup’ik society. During the smallpox epidemic, the Yup’ik people adapted the new disease to their belief system. The “Great Sickness” occurred only sixty years later among a people who had not yet witnessed dramatic cultural change, so comparisons to smallpox are appropriate. Also, the shamans played a crucial role in psychological counseling, which many people likely relied upon after grappling with the devastating psychological effects of losing so many family members and friends.

The Kilbucks left Bethel in the fall of 1900, just as the Yup’ik people were settling back into their lives.<sup>135</sup> Their departure after fifteen years in the area, and so soon after the epidemic, likely had some negative repercussions on their congregation. Dr. Romig and his wife departed Bethel in 1903. After a furlough in the United States, the Romigs returned to western Alaska to

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<sup>132</sup>White, 271.

<sup>133</sup>Anderson, 198-201.

<sup>134</sup>*Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren, 1901*, 33.

<sup>135</sup>Henkelman, 65.

serve at the Carmel mission station, where Dr. Romig started a small hospital.<sup>136</sup> Romig left a mere two years after the “Great Sickness,” and it is doubtful that he was able to rebuild relationships with most Eskimos. Although this is merely postulation, one wonders if the shamans would have lost their influence faster if he had stayed and proved the worth of Western medicine again.

The Moravian faith did not grow dramatically in the years immediately after the “Great Sickness.” Missionaries still encountered opposition in their travels to Yup'ik villages. Sometimes people were content with their Russian Orthodoxy, while others wished to remain without religious affiliations, possibly so that they could continue to practice their traditional spirituality in peace. In 1904, missionary John Hinz noted that planned sermons in several villages had to be canceled because all the men pretended to be asleep in the *qasgiqs*.<sup>137</sup>

In the decades that followed the epidemics of 1900, shamanic healing remained an important part of Yup'ik life. Shamans continued vastly to outnumber the white missionaries, and were much more convenient to consult. Also, as diseases like tuberculosis became more prevalent among the Eskimos, they turned to the shamans because the missionaries had no medicines to cure them.<sup>138</sup> Hinz described an interaction with a Yup'ik man who argued against adopting Christianity because “if they accepted baptism they must give up their native doctor, which would be unfortunate, as our medicine did not always avail.”<sup>139</sup> When the Kilbucks returned to the Kuskokwim in 1919, fearful that the influenza epidemic had spread there, they noted that the Eskimos continued to practice many traditional ceremonies.<sup>140</sup> Luckily, the terrible influenza epidemic of 1918 did not affect western Alaska because the region was quarantined

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<sup>136</sup>Schwalbe, 69-70.

<sup>137</sup>*Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren, 1904*, 79-80.

<sup>138</sup>Oswalt, *Bashful*, 88.

<sup>139</sup>*Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren, 1904*, 82-83.

<sup>140</sup>Fienup-Riordan, *Real People*, 336, 344.



after reports of the illness in other regions of the territory.<sup>141</sup> In 1929, missionaries Augustus Martin and Charles Michael went to a village and were refused entrance to a home. When they went inside they found a shaman working over a small child dying from tuberculosis. Brother Martin was “impelled to speak outright against the work of the old sorcerer present there, with his rattles and incantations.”<sup>142</sup>

The Moravian missionaries continued to focus on their successful converts. They noted that after the “Great Sickness,” most of their converts came from the Russian Orthodox Church, since the Russian missionary failed to visit them often. The remaining “heathens” were still set in their traditional ways.<sup>143</sup> The missionaries did not see what went on in villages far from their mission, where shamans were still likely practicing their healing activities. Edward William Nelson, who spent several years at St. Michael in the late 1870s, argued that the results of missionary efforts had only been to encourage the Eskimos to be more secretive in practicing their traditional ceremonies.<sup>144</sup> The forceful proselytizing by the missionaries may have encouraged some Eskimos to be more secretive about their shamanic practices.

Access to Western medical care slowly increased in the early decades of the twentieth century, especially after a hospital was built in Akiak in 1918.<sup>145</sup> Another missionary, John Hinz, took over medical care along the Kuskokwim River after the Romigs' departure and distributed medicines to the Eskimos.<sup>146</sup> However, the shamans' powers as healers were slow to wane. By the mid-1920s, Yup'ik shamans still attended most illnesses, according to the Moravian missionaries

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141Henkelman, 65.

142Schwalbe, 178.

143*Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren*, 1904, 63.

144Edward William Nelson, “The Eskimo About Bering Strait,” in *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington D.C.: Washington Government Printing Office, 1899), 421.

145Oswalt, *Bashful*, 88.

146 *Proceedings of the Society of the United Brethren*, 1904, 62.

stationed in western Alaska.<sup>147</sup>

The next medical doctor who came to western Alaska arrived in 1936. Dr. Otto George was offered a position as a traveling physician in western Alaska. Stationed at Akiak, he cared for Eskimos in nearby villages. George expressed surprise that the Yup'ik Eskimos still relied on shamans. He wrote, "With the knowledge that there had been medical care for the area for the greater part of 50 years I expected the natives to be pretty well acquainted with modern medicine, and that the native superstitions about medicine men had been replaced by modern ideas. I soon found I was badly mistaken."<sup>148</sup> Another story will serve to demonstrate how entrenched the shamans' powers remained long after the missionaries arrived. One hopes that John Kilbuck never heard this story. In the fall of 1899, Kilbuck had accidentally hooked his hand while fishing and suffered blood poisoning. In a feat of medical heroics, Romig successfully amputated part of John Kilbuck's arm to save his life. While interviewing Yup'ik Eskimos at Napakiak in the 1950s, Oswalt reported that Lower Kuskokwim Eskimos still believed Kilbuck's arm was amputated due to a magical fight with a local shaman.<sup>149</sup>

## Conclusion

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Yup'ik society transformed to incorporate new goods, technologies, institutions, and ideas. The Moravian missionaries had an especially powerful impact on Yup'ik life. The Moravians strove to replace the reliance on shamans with Western medicines, to replace traditional ceremonies and rituals with prayers and Bible instruction, and to replace traditional social and sexual norms with a nuclear family. The

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147S.H. Gapp, *Where Polar Ice Begins: The Moravian Mission in Alaska* (Bethlehem, PA: Comenius Press, 1928), 38.

148Otto George, *Eskimo Medicine Man* (Oregon Historical Society, 1979), 2, 39.

149Oswalt, *Mission of Change*, 99.

tensions highlighted by the death of Brother Hooker remained part of Yup'ik life well into the twentieth century as people struggled with the choices offered by the various denominations versus the comfort and security of their traditional beliefs. However, Western medical care was an innovation that most people embraced regardless of their religious affiliation. The Yup'ik people responded well to medicines that cured common illnesses, which encouraged many to convert to the Moravian Church, despite the animosity of the Russian Orthodox Church and the shamans. Over time, a decline in the importance of shamans was inevitable, especially as the Yup'ik people became exposed to and then enmeshed in a broader American culture. However, the "Great Sickness," with its terrible mortality and the accompanying loss of faith in Western medicine, temporarily halted the Yup'ik peoples' slow repudiation of shamans as healers. As they had in the past, when the Yup'ik Eskimos were confronted with terrible sickness and death, the shamans interpreted the tragedy in meaningful ways and provided comfort for the survivors.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion and Epilogue: And the Yup'ik Culture Survives

Between 1998 and 2002 the Calista Elders Council, a non-profit group representing over 1,300 Yup'ik elders from the Yukon-Kuskokwim region, organized a series of conventions designed to transmit traditional knowledge to the younger generation. Born in the early decades of the twentieth century, the elder men and women who attended these conferences were the last Yup'ik generation to be raised in the *qasgiqs* and sod houses. They were born before schools and churches were built, and before federal aid and government oversight began to dictate life in the region.<sup>1</sup>

At each convention, a panel of elders discussed topics that included family values, traditional ceremonies, and rules for proper living. The small audience of young and middle-aged people listened attentively to elders like Paul John, who told them, “I am not at all stingy with putting our traditional way of life in books and tape recorders because we will not always be alive, because [those books and tapes] will be giving the things that you wrote and the things that we said to our younger people who are thirsty to drink our way of life.” The convention discussions were recorded and transcribed into Yup'ik and then translated into English. Anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan worked with Yup'ik scholars to create *Yup'ik Words of Wisdom: Yupiit Qanruyutait*, a bilingual text of selected transcripts. She also published an anthropological study of the elders' stories and advice in *Wise Words of the Yup'ik People: We Talk to You Because We Love You*. Now English and Yup'ik speakers have access to a common set of the cultural knowledge shared by the elders.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Wise Words of the Yup'ik People: We Talk to You Because We Love You* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), xxv-xxvi.

2 Ibid., xxvii-xxx.

During the conferences, Yup'ik elders described cultural changes over their long lifetimes. The elders blamed missionaries and government schools for dismissing traditional values and sabotaging elder authority, but they also expressed hope for the future. Mark John told a gathering of Yup'ik Eskimos in Toksook Bay, "We are starting to work on returning to Yup'ik ways. When these churches and the schools came, a lot of people quit speaking about these ways. And today, they are starting to speak of it again after keeping it to themselves."<sup>3</sup> Besides the conventions, Yup'ik elders are today also sharing their knowledge at cultural camps, which are designed to teach children subsistence skills, oral history, and cultural traditions.<sup>4</sup>

Modern Yup'ik Eskimos negotiate a changing culture. As their children grow up in an increasingly global society with satellite television, snow machines, and packaged foods, elders worry about the loss of traditional knowledge. Yet, elders like Mark John are correct in their expressions of optimism. Yup'ik society still maintains a strong cultural connection to the ways of life prior to intensive contact with white people. Anthropologist Wendell Oswalt argues that "a singular hallmark of Eskimo culture in its five thousand years of recognized existence has been the capacity of these people to adapt to changing environmental circumstances while strengthening their own distinct identity."<sup>5</sup> The Yup'ik cosmology system, although adapted to the religious influences of Christianity, still shapes Yup'ik values. The continued presence of the Yup'ik language, subsistence harvesting, dances, ritual distributions, and other traditional activities are strong examples of cultural continuity.<sup>6</sup> However, the profound adjustments that accompanied the arrival of Russians and then Americans in western Alaska have also shaped

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3 Ibid., 1.

4 Ann Fienup-Riordan and Alice Rearden, "Kenekngamceci Qanrutamceci (We Talk to You Because We Love You): Yup'ik 'Culturalism' at the Umkumiut Culture Camp," *Arctic Anthropology* 40, no. 2 (2003): 100.

5 Wendell Oswalt, *Bashful No Longer: An Alaskan Eskimo Ethnohistory, 1778-1988* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 188.

6 Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays: Yup'ik Lives and How We See Them* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 69, 220.

modern Yup'ik life. In reality, Yup'ik society today is a complex cultural aggregate of traditional Eskimo, Russian, and American cultures.

Societies are never static, but constantly evolve to absorb new peoples, ideas, and technology. On the grand scale of time, the transformation of culture can be gradual and almost imperceptible, or sudden and shocking. The Yup'ik Eskimos experienced a staggering cultural shift over the past two centuries, while also holding onto many traditional practices, like shamanism, well into the twentieth century. Perhaps the best way to comprehend the vast changes is to compare the Yup'ik worlds at the cusps of three centuries.

In 1800, the Yup'ik people inhabited a world of physical and spiritual abundance. The Eskimos drew from a wide variety of subsistence foods that they harvested in seasonal rounds. The world was full of spiritual power. Spirits inhabited everything and people maintained positive relationships with the spirit realm by following prescribed rules for daily living. If someone broke the rules, then a period of famine or sickness could visit the people. A rich ceremonial life of dancing, song, feast, and ritual also connected the Yup'ik Eskimos to both the physical and otherworldly realms. Shamans played a vital community role, serving as healers, leaders, and spiritual guides. The Yup'ik Eskimos participated in a vast trade network that brought them into contact with people who represented different, yet complementary, cultures.

Their world was far from idyllic. Long ago, major cultural change accompanied the Thule invasion of western Alaska, and violence or extermination may have been a factor in the spread of Thule culture. The Yup'ik people struggled with disease and starvation. Famine visited so often that their mobile and flexible society was designed to survive periods of scarcity by relying on kin networks that stretched across the region. Warfare was a constant way of life for some time as the Bow and Arrow Wars drew the entire region into battle.

By the year 1900, the Yup'ik world had survived major upheaval as first Russians and then Americans arrived in western Alaska. Russian fur traders brought new trade goods and a foreign culture to western Alaska, which exposed the Eskimos to new economic, social, and religious ideas. The fur traders who came to the region did not wish to exterminate the people, although the pathogens that they carried almost did. Diseases that the Yup'ik people had never before experienced killed off about half the population in 1838 to 1839, and then again in 1900. Despite the shamans' inability to cure new sicknesses like smallpox, measles, and influenza, the Yup'ik people were able to incorporate the diseases into a belief system that recognized limits to the shamans' abilities when faced with unhelpful spirits or an especially powerful enemy. Briefly, the Eskimos viewed Russians as bearers of epidemics, which caused some violence and suspicion, especially of the Russian Orthodox missionaries, but did not interfere with trade.

After the United States bought Alaska in 1867, the Russians abandoned their company forts and turned the fur trade over to American hands. Remaining Russian Orthodox missionaries witnessed the arrival of Moravian missionaries in 1885, who immediately launched a passionate campaign to “civilize” the Eskimos. The influx of American traders and gold miners to the region in the late 1800s brought major changes to Eskimo economic practices. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Yup'ik people were heavily engaged in trade with Westerners and slowly adopting a cash economy. Relations with the white people were sometimes strained as the Yup'ik people wrestled with the spiritual promises of Christianity while also desiring to maintain traditional beliefs. The true test of Moravian influence in the region came when the 1900 influenza epidemic decimated the Yup'ik population. My study here emphasizes that once again, this turned the people away from Western medicine and led them back into the *qasgiq* for physical and psychological healing at the hands of the shamans.

At the turn of the millennium, the Yup'ik world shared many similarities with mainstream American society. Nearly twenty thousand Eskimos are scattered among seventy small villages. Each Yup'ik community features both an elementary and secondary school, clinic, at least one church, airstrip, and city government. Nuclear families now watch television and speak English in their wood frame homes that feature electricity and indoor plumbing.<sup>7</sup> Children attend federally-funded schools and some go away to college. Family ties have spread far beyond the regional groupings of traditional Eskimo society as Yup'ik people move to other parts of Alaska and the world. Although no road system connects the region, daily airplane service from Bethel to Anchorage provides the Eskimos with access to a variety of imported foods and goods.<sup>8</sup>

Yup'ik people confront the same problems as many other Native American groups with respect to how to assimilate into the broader American society. Since the 1960s, the rural Eskimo schools systems have struggled with serious questions about the value of teaching traditional culture to prepare children for the modern world. Some argue that traditional practices for food gathering and storage, medicines, and survival techniques like predicting the weather, demonstrate that Yup'ik ancestors engaged in a form of traditional science that should be acknowledged in the modern Alaskan education system.<sup>9</sup> Educational committees debate over how to develop culturally-relevant curriculum that balances the presentation of traditional knowledge in a positive light, while providing meaningful training in other areas. Bilingual education also remains a controversial issue.<sup>10</sup>

Like other indigenous peoples, Yup'ik Eskimos face a myriad of social and economic problems. Health issues, particularly tuberculosis, ravaged Yup'ik society for decades. In 1930,

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7 Ibid., 29.

8 Oswalt, 177.

9 Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley, *A Yupiaq Worldview: A Pathway to Ecology and Spirit*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 2006), 50-52.

10 Oswalt, 140.



tuberculosis accounted for one out of three deaths among all Alaskan natives, and the Yup'ik Eskimos probably suffered comparable rates. Many children died of tuberculosis and mothers in the mid-1900s saw few children to adulthood. Also, parents who suffered from the disease were unable to care for children and sometimes sent away to sanitariums. When a father contracted tuberculosis and could no longer provide for the family, their quality of life tended to decrease dramatically. Many whites, especially teachers, had “an almost pathological fear” of contracting tuberculosis and would avoid any physical contact with the Eskimos in their villages, which led many Eskimos to feel as though they were second-class citizens in their own villages. By 1970, with the combination of chemotherapy to treat tuberculosis and preventative programs, the death rate from tuberculosis dropped dramatically.<sup>11</sup> While shamans treated tuberculosis and other incurable diseases in the past, improvements in medical care probably led people away from shamanistic treatments.

In the 1950s, the United States government extended social programs to the region to help lift the Eskimos out of poverty. Federal aid to improve housing, nutrition, and health ameliorated living conditions for many Yup'ik people.<sup>12</sup> However, social issues continue to plague the region. In recent decades, the Yup'ik villages have confronted high rates of suicide, alcoholism, domestic violence, child abuse and sexual assault.<sup>13</sup>

The federal government also hoped to improve economic conditions in western Alaska with the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971. This complex act, which addressed the issue of aboriginal land claims on a federal level, was designed to give Native Alaskans economic power through monetary compensation and development rights in

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 146-147.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Wolsko, et al., “Conceptions of Wellness among the Yup'ik of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta: The Vitality of Social and Natural Connection,” *Ethnicity and Health* 11, no. 4 (2006): 349.

exchange for releasing their aboriginal land titles. Individuals were required to prove their native heritage and to identify traditionally occupied geographic areas in order to be recognized under the act. ANCSA also established twelve regional for-profit corporations and village-level corporations to administer the land and money received through the act. Many expected that the settlement act would intensify the process of Americanization among Yup'ik Eskimos. Instead, “the act united them as never before and led to a new search for an Eskimo cultural identity.”<sup>14</sup>

Economic conditions in the region are slowly improving, which will hopefully mitigate the social problems over time. Yup'ik men and women are now employed as bureaucrats, fisherman, public-sector workers, and hold service jobs.<sup>15</sup> Seasonal work became available with regular air service included fire fighting, freight transportation, and employment with government defense projects and the Alaska Railroad. Many also receive welfare aid from state and federal programs. Most Yup'ik people still rely partially on subsistence practices to supplement their wage incomes. Salmon remains a vital resource, due to the high price of imported foods compared to the generally low salaries of Eskimos, a seasonal abundance of salmon, and the traditional role of salmon in the Eskimo diet.<sup>16</sup>

Today most Yup'ik Eskimos belong to Christian churches. The vital role of the shamans in a Yup'ik community, which survived so many previous challenges, appears to have faded. The loss of faith in shamanic curing in the twentieth century is not well-studied and so the rate and specifics of the decline are unknown at this time. However, there are a few hints that indicate shamans may still practice in the Yukon-Kuskokwim area. By the 1950s, older Eskimos continued to utilize homeopathic medicines to cure illness, despite reliable access to hospitals and trained medical personnel. Shamans were still generally called on to treat serious sprains,

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14 Oswalt, 171-175, 189.

15 Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays*, 31.

16 Oswalt, 154, 184.

deep cuts, and chronic illnesses before a person would go to the local white teachers or doctors for care.<sup>17</sup> As the elder generation died out and Western medical care became increasingly accessible, the shamans' work as healers inevitably lost importance. However, Oswalt believes that shamans still practice among the Yup'ik people.<sup>18</sup>

The story of how shamans maintained a strong influence in Yup'ik life through so many devastating challenges bears telling because it stands as a testament to the Eskimos' ability to integrate new knowledge into their belief system. Yup'ik society has changed dramatically in the past two centuries from scattered sod homes to electrified villages, from a spirit-controlled world to a monotheistic Christian world, and from a subsistence to a wage economy. Yet, the Eskimos also maintain a connection to their ancient past, which can inspire those of us who have lost the tenuous thread to our own ancestors.

When Russian explorer L.A. Zagoskin traveled through the Yukon-Kuskokwim region in the early 1840s, he remarked in his journal,

A wide field lies open, after our meager harvest, to anyone with better means and opportunity to describe the disposition and habits of these people—we have only raised the curtain. If we wish to preserve the memory of their primitive life, it is well to hurry: with the spread of Christianity and the contact with our way of living the natives so quickly lose their native character that in a decade or so the old people will be ashamed to recount and will conceal their former customs, beliefs, and other habits, and their whole social life will change.<sup>19</sup>

Zagoskin's worrisome prediction about the future of Yup'ik culture proved too pessimistic.

Instead of relinquishing cultural integrity to outside influence, the Yup'ik people achieved something rare. They have managed to retain, adapt, and strengthen their traditional culture into the twenty-first century.

17 Wendell Oswalt, "Guiding Culture Change Among Alaskan Eskimos (Second Part)," *America Indigena* 21, no. 2 (1961): 161-162.

18 Oswalt, *Bashful No Longer*, 187.

19 L.A. Zagoskin, *Lieutenant Zagoskin's Travels in Russian America, 1842-1844*, ed. Henry N. Michael (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 231.

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